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**LOOK WHO'S TALKING, LOOK WHO'S LISTENING, LOOK WHO'S
HEARING: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE PARENT-TEACHER
CONFERENCE**

By

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A DISSERTATION

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of

Curriculum, Teaching, and Educational Policy

2002

ABSTRACT

LOOK WHO'S TALKING, LOOK WHO'S LISTENING, LOOK WHO'S HEARING: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE

By

Bonnie I. Rockafellow

The research question driving this study is: What effect does the discourse in a parent teacher conference have on the participants' understandings and satisfaction with the conference? Questions that arise out of this central question may be: What does the discourse of a parent-teacher conference look like? What are the effects of the teacher's language choices on the parent-teacher conference? What are the effects of the parent's language choices on the parent-teacher conference? Is a Discourse of education[1] evident in the parent-teacher conference? Are power issues at play in the discourse of the parent-teacher conference?

This research responds to the continuing sense of frustration and dissatisfaction that teachers and parents express with regard to conference experiences relating to student progress and performance. I conducted this study in two suburban school districts. The study is grounded in the social constructivist theoretical perspective and was influenced further by related research on the physical setting of parent-teacher conferences as well as thought and preparation for parent-teacher conferences.

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[1] Discourse in this study refers to the totality of the interaction, the speaking and listening that occurs in the context of a parent-teacher conference, including the identity and placement of self—what Gee calls an "identity kit." The discourse in parent-teacher conferences for the purpose of this study also includes issues of addressivity and dialogicality (Bakhtin, 1986). What sense is being made from the words used during the conference? Issues of power and authority enter into this consideration of discourse as well through the unintentional choice of words and meanings assigned.

To consider these questions, I analyzed seven spring parent-teacher conferences. One first grade, a third grade, and a combination third and fourth grade classroom from two suburban school districts participated. From the analysis it is evident that: (a) all interactions between teachers, parents, and students are significant in forming meaning and understandings; (b) the teachers' choice of words correlated closely with the teachers' beliefs about the purpose and function of the conference; and (c) a ritual plays out in conferences.

Recommendations for the future involve a more focused planning of conferences by teachers in order to avoid default interactions that are ritualistic and dissatisfying to the participants. Teacher education programs must provide new and different ways to interact at the parent-teacher conference to facilitate more effective adult communication. Educators need to consider new events for interacting in order to fulfill the goal of creating parent-teacher conference experiences that are satisfying, relational, interactions between parents and teachers. Further research and study of language, meaning, and action that facilitates more satisfying parent-teacher conferences is needed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Finally, I must acknowledge the professional response of colleagues who have listened to my assertions regarding the power of parents in the lives of learners. Peggy listened and responded tirelessly to many versions of the assertions throughout this study. Each time we gathered for a professional meeting they would have to listen to my challenge of "what about information for the parents." Thank you for your thoughtful challenges and continued support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.

The above truism is often stated with a humorous intent. However, when we consider this truism in light of the parent-teacher conference, it creates a feeling of dismay. As a parent I have attended a multitude of parent-teacher conferences; as a teacher I have been involved in even more. The results of some of these experiences were less than satisfactory. I kept asking myself why is it so difficult to generate a parent-teacher conference that is a satisfying experience for all participants. My experiences and frustrations with the parent-teacher conference provided the impetus for this study.

The purpose of this study is to investigate what influence discourse[1] has upon the parent[2]-teacher conference. In this study I looked at positioning of the participants within the parent-teacher conference as one of the effects of discourse. I considered what "speech genre" might be in use within the conference. Just as the definition of discourse indicates, the interaction between teachers and parents is pregnant with issues that have

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[1] For the purposes of this study, Discourse(with a capital "D") embodies within it the concept of "ways of being." When the word discourse occurs within the text with a small "d" it is in reference to the dialogue or language that is occurring within a context. Gee addresses Discourse as an "identity kit" (Gee, 1991). In Gee's terms "A Discourse is a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network,' or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful 'role'"(p.143).

[2] The term parent in this study is inclusive of all adult caregivers who interact with the school on behalf of a student. Today's society has a wide variety of adults assuming the responsibility of the parent to students. References to parents in this study include relatives, and state appointed individuals that interact with teachers on behalf of the student in order to promote academic achievement.

the potential to allow students to improve academically or limit their achievement. This study sought to answer the question: What is taking place in the discourse of a parent-teacher conference?

<div align="center">The Purpose of This Study</div>

The purpose of this study was to consider what influence discourse has upon the parent-teacher conference. Questions that arose out of this central question were:

1. What does the discourse of a parent-teacher conference look like?

2. What are the effects of the teacher's language choices on the parent-teacher conference?

3. What are the effects of the parent's language choices on the parent-teacher conference?

4. Is there a Discourse of education at work in the parent-teacher conference?

People make decisions and have conversations daily on an automatic level. Seldom do people give conscious thought to the meaning of each word or string of words uttered. This level of language automaticity is what allows us to go through our daily lives and carry out our responsibilities in a cohesive, relatively effortless manner. The accomplishment of tasks at an automatic level allows us to focus our energies on more unfamiliar cognitive experiences. We can't expend cognitive energies on everything we do because our lives would become excruciatingly laborious. While language automaticity frees us to focus on other aspects of our lives, this automatic language also has a downside. That is, we don't always examine the assumptions our language is based on. Could unexamined assumptions about language and its usage, combined with this automaticity, generate some of the dissatisfaction that I felt as a parent and teacher during and after parent-teacher conferences?

In the chapters that follow, I examine the discourse of parent-teacher conferences in order to answer the research questions posed above. In Chapter 1, I define and highlight issues involving discourse, cognitive theories, and the communication factors that shape the discourse of parent-teacher conferences. In Chapter 2, I develop the issues of discourse, cognitive theories, and communication from the discussion of Chapter 1. Chapter 3 provides the procedures involved in selecting my research site and participants, as well as the tools I used to gather my data. Chapter 4 examines the physical setting for each conference and reports the discourse histories and resulting use of words within the parent-teacher conferences I observed. In Chapter 5, I examine the discourse of the parent-teacher conference to consider its impact on the participants' satisfaction and their understandings that result. The study concludes with Chapter 6, which considers the findings and implications for parents, teachers, and teacher educators that I generated from this study.

Defining Discourse

Discourse, which has become a prominent word in recent research of interactions

between people, has served multiple purposes down through history. Discourse is

derived from the Latin dis-curus, "to run in different directions" (Singer, 1993) and was

considered to be synonymous with talk. Discourse soon moved to include conversation

and, when used in early linguistic discussions, was expanded more to an organizational

form beyond the level of a clause or sentence. For the purposes of this study, Discourse

(with a capital "D") embodies within it the concept of "ways of being." When the word

discourse occurs within the text with a small "d," it is in reference to the dialogue or

language that is occurring within a context. Gee addresses Discourse as an "identity kit"

(p. 142, Gee, 1990).

In Gee's terms, "a Discourse is a socially accepted association among ways of

using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to

identify one's self as a member of a socially meaningful group or social network, or to

signal that one is playing a socially meaningful 'role'" (p. 143). Discourse analysis is

now inclusive of the structure of language as well as the contextualized use of speech.

Most recently, discourse has been recognized as having a social component. When we

consider discourse it must be in relationship to a specific community or context.

Discourse has also been used to describe a specific talk within specific disciplines

such as mathematical talk or scientific talk. This more narrowly defines discourse as

specific ways of using language or words, which identifies the user with a discipline of

study. When we consider scientific talk we draw a verbal image of a person who may be

dressed in a specific way, i.e., a laboratory coat. This person may also be placed in a specific setting, as one who works in a medical laboratory or uses instruments like a microscope. Further envisioning may create even more detail as we build an image of someone with poor vision, wearing glasses, looking tired, talking in a symbolic language, and so on. This sense of the word discourse is what I am thinking of as I use it in this study. Discourse includes Gee's definition as Discourse being an "identity kit."

Gee gives five specifics that are a part of this definition of Discourse.

1. Discourse is ideological because it displays values and viewpoints that define membership. The choice and usage of words grow out of an individual's set of values and perceptions. Since individuals are members of a variety of groups, all holding ideologies, they select words when they speak that reflect the ideologies of the groups they have positioned themselves in for the current verbal interaction.

2. Discourses are difficult to criticize when being used by members of a discourse community since such criticism would bring into question the speaker's own group membership. If people are critical of the Discourse in a way that diminishes its strength, that criticism removes the speaker from being within the Discourse and within acceptance.

3. Discourses not only define membership but also take a stance that is in opposition to other discourses. When I am with a group of teachers and make a generalized critical comment about teachers, those with whom I am talking will often respond with a comment that seems to remove me from the Discourse group "of teacher." Or if I am speaking as a parent, but make a critical statement regarding parents to a teacher group, they will accept me back into the "Discourse group" which defines teachers. As a Discourse is utilized, it draws on certain objects, concepts, viewpoints, and values and not others. In some cases the selection or rejection of objects, concepts, viewpoints and values used in discourse may be benign; in other cases, these choices are by design.

4. Therefore, using a specific discourse may marginalize the viewpoints and values that are central to other discourses. Those outside of a particular Discourse are able to discern the boundaries. Perhaps this is why my nieces and nephews would often warn each other when my words changed and became a "teacher's voice," which signaled to them to pay attention and obey. It may not have been so much the voice as it was the way in which I

used the words. These children were able to discern a change in the Discourse and the attached power that the change generated.

5. Discourses are concerned with the distribution of power and hierarchy in a society. Societies give value and social power to some Discourses over others, which can lead to an acquisition of social goods like money, power, and status (Gee, in Mitchell & Weiler, 1991). In the following section I will describe the types and functions of discourse. These types and functions can contribute to the distribution of power and establishment of a hierarchy during discourse.

Types of Discourse

Researchers like Bakhtin (1986) Gudykunst (1991) Ochs, (1986) Cazden (1988) and Barnes, Britton, and Torbe (1995) provide ideas and categories for thinking about several types of discourse. Generative, familiar, authoritative and academic discourse types provide useful descriptions of interactions for this study and are discussed in this next section.

Generative language. Bakhtin's idea of generative language, which offers more invitations to respond to and create extensions or transformations of ideas, (Bakhtin, 1986; Wertsch, 1991) classifies words as internally persuasive or authoritative. The idea of an internally persuasive language is generative language. Internally persuasive language incorporates more open-ended exchange and ways to mean and it provides an opportunity for both the hearer and speaker to generate new ideas from the utterances shared. Within the generative type of language are relational words. These relational words allow for the joint development of information by combining generative and affective words. Words used from this category are concerned with the establishment of shared information, generative responses, and empathy. Relational words include language that invites response and elaboration; this category of words includes words that

6

jointly generate meanings and involve active listening and responding. Many examples of "take up" focus on repetition of the speaker's words.

Familiar language. Familiar language is often reflective of home language. Affective words are frequently used to describe connections between people and objects. An example of familiar language is given in Wertsch: As a child (Danny) shares about a piece of lava that he received from a recent trip to Hawaii. Danny refers to the piece of lava in a familiar affective frame of reference, with this statement; "I've always been, um, taking care of it. It's never fallen down and broken" (Wertsch, 1991 pp. 113-114). This language pattern uses words that reference responsibility for caring.

Authoritative language. Authoritative language discourse assumes that text or utterances demand an "unconditional allegiance"(Wertsch, p. 78). Another way to think about classifying words is to focus on words that present information and report facts (Gudykunst, 1991). Bakhtin refers to a (Wertsch, 1991) classification of words that are authoritative. Authoritative statements are more closed in nature; the tones and actual words leave the hearer as the receptor of information, leaving little room for challenge or alternate views. Classroom language has often been described as authoritative language.

Academic language. Academic language includes words that provide explanations that are likely to be dichotomous scientific terms. Language used in classroom discourse often exhibits a classroom genre's specific "indexical" characteristic (Ochs 1988). When the teacher spoke of Danny's lava rock using descriptive terms such as big or small, smooth or rough, she moved toward the scientific definition to "decontextualize" the talk from the student's original contextualization. Formal classroom language is more propositional, where information is to be presented as static,

7

singularly interpreted. It allows for less interaction and expansion on the part of the hearer. Cazden (1988) uses the idea of "teacher talk," such as when a teacher uses more of the formal language words. The words in teacher talk focus more on reporting facts than on creating an invitation to respond.

Cazden (1988) points out the work of Mary Budd Rowe in researching the changes that the use of silence and wait time can bring in the interaction patterns between teachers and students. Rowe indicates that when teacher-student interactions increased wait time from the typical one second or less to three or four seconds, these changes occurred:

1. Teacher's responses exhibit greater flexibility.

2. Teachers ask fewer questions, and more of them are cognitively complex.

3. Teachers become more adept at using student responses.

4. Expectations for the performances of certain students seem to improve.

5. Some previously invisible people become visible.

6. Students are no longer restricted to responding to teacher questions and get to practice all four of the moves (i.e., soliciting, responding, reacting and structuring) (Cazden, 1988, p. 60-61)

The speech style of the teacher creates the sense of the language of a lesson. The talk of the lesson has each of the four moves, soliciting, responding, reacting, and structuring, as well as a rapid pace. It creates the authoritative language that leaves little room for challenge or extension. While a slower speech style allows for more "exploration" (Barnes, et al, 1995). Perhaps we can connect the slower pace to Bakhtin's idea of generative language, which offers more invitations to respond and create extensions or transformations of ideas.

From the discourse types presented here, research clearly identifies classroom discourse as what the teacher and students engage in. I enter this study with the suspicion that when parents and teachers have conferences, they engage in a Discourse of education. The insights highlighted by the classroom discourse research provide "clues" for me to consider as I look at discourse in the parent-teacher conference.

Functions of Discourse

Discourse analysis is one system of study that allows the researcher to infer meaning from utterances of the participants in conversations. Since it is difficult to get "inside" an individual's mind and ascertain the intent of the speaker's words or the effect (sense made) for the listener, the researcher is left with the utterance of individuals during conversation. Davies and Harre (1991) present discourse as a public process with meanings being dynamically created and it is crucial that the participant's view of the event be drawn out. Conversational interaction exhibits a multitude of ways the participants can order their words in relationship to their perspectives of the dynamics of the conversation.

The discourse concept of "face" and "face threatening acts" from Goffman (1976) expands an understanding of Davies and Harre's "positioning." Face is understood as an intangible that is emotionally invested, can be lost, maintained, or enhanced (Coulthard 1992, p. 50). Face can be compared to Davies and Harre's "ways of thinking about one's self. In positioning oneself during a conversation, the speaker selects words, sometimes carefully and at other times not so carefully, that affects the face of the participants. The hearers also position themselves as they infer meaning from the speaker's words. These multiple perspectives that occur throughout any conversation involve ways of thinking

about one's self relative to the other participants, either saving or losing face. The participants utter words and infer meanings selectively, based on their prior experiences.

Another discourse analysis concept is register, i.e., identifying ways of speaking within in any community and identifying specific patterns with particular situations. The concept of register as used in discourse analysis refers to the speaking conventions of a particular role and also is used as a speech marker of that role. Researchers like Cazden, Michaels, and Heath have shown that classroom talk is of a specific register, which separates it from other discourses. Classroom talk occurs in a well-defined register of teacher-initiated questions (I), student response (R), and teacher evaluation (E). Since we know that "any social institution can be considered a communication system" (Cazden 1988, p. 2) and that oral language is the main tool of this communication system, it is valuable to make communication patterns within these parent-teacher conferences visible. The "language of curriculum, the language of control, and the language of personal identity"[3] (Cazden 1988, p. 3) operate as a part of the social institution of school.

Do the language of curriculum, the language of control, and the language of personal identity also operate in the parent-teacher conference? My study includes these language functions, "the communication of propositional information, the establishment and maintenance of social relationships as well as the expression of the speaker's identity (Ibid.). I also examined in this study as referential (participant) perspectives, power and positioning in operation through discourse, as a part of the social institution of school. I considered the discourse of the parent-teacher conference and an awareness of classroom

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[3] Language here is the word taken from Cazden's introduction to *Classroom Discourse* (1988). It is used here in exchange for discourse, meaning the words that are used and are reflective of text, power and identities.

talk as a speech register to help me to look at the discourse as it unfolds between the parent and teacher.

Positioning. One-way discourse functions involve the positioning of individuals is through their use of discourse. Positioning is the dynamic and continuously changing view of self in relationship to the people with whom we engage in discourse (Davies & Harre, 1991). This positioning is frequently done unintentionally by participants through their choice of words and perception of roles. Bakhtin (1986) writes of the speaker's words as being manifested primarily in the choice of a particular speech genre or discourse.

> This choice is determined by the specific nature of the given sphere of
> speech communication, semantic (thematic) considerations, the concrete
> situation of the speech communication, the personal composition of its
> participants, and so on (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 78).

Positioning creates a view of self that then determines how power is distributed and utilized to gain the social goods a society has to offer. Erickson (1975), in his research of counselors' decisions regarding student programs of study, demonstrated how important being able to operate within a specific Discourse is in gaining access to social goods, in this case a specific class or course of study. In the educational setting, the social goods include access to knowledge, a validation of different knowledge, which may reward or withhold status in the immediate situation. Embedded in this element of positioning is the issue of power, power that is both personal and institutional.

In the parent-teacher conference, this "turning to someone else" for the speaker involves all that the listener is and represents. Addressivity issues involve concepts of "who is doing the speaking," (Wertsch, 1991 p. 53) which calls up images across time

11

past as well as time present. Other images are also called up through the issue of "who is *being* addressed" (Ibid.) with all of its historical implications as well. When parents and *teachers* come together at the parent-teacher conference, their understanding of words as *tools* to convey meaning versus words as sources to generate meaning (Wertsch, 1991) *may* introduce or allow for misunderstandings to be created. Goodman (1989) addresses *this idea* in action when pointing out that educators seem to ritualize their talk to parents *and parents* passively absorb what they are being told. This model is used in many "how to" articles that discuss what a "good" parent-teacher conference looks like (*How to Talk to Parents and Get the Message Home*, 1983). Goodman states that this situation often *places* parents and teachers as "actors" on an "antiquated stage" (p. 19).

Referential perspective. Another function of discourse is the role it plays in the "referential perspective" (Wertsch, 1991 p. 109) of the speaker in giving explanations and answers. This referential perspective relates to the ways in which speakers express themselves in relationship to what they believe the hearer is able to understand or expects. Bakhtin (Wertsch, 1991) stated that utterances play off from the hearer and are not indifferent, independent or self-sufficient. This knowledge helps the teacher form appropriate responses that encourage generative interaction. For example, when a student gives an answer that differs from what a teacher was anticipating during the common IRE sequence of the classroom, a teacher with knowledge of how utterances play off of the hearer may ask the child to explain why he/she gave that answer. Traditionally teachers simply respond in a manner that indicates the incorrectness of the answer and move on to another student for the correct answer as though it exists apart from the student's personal knowledge. Understanding referential perspective allows a teacher to consider a broader

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range of responses as appropriate. Only as teachers began to consider their own discourse styles and those of the children within the classroom are they able to rethink their views regarding what is occurring in the classroom. The differences in language use and meaning hinder student achievement.

When considering referential perspective and interactions with parents many factors similar to the interactions between teacher and student are present. Often parents are unable to interact fully with a teacher because teachers miss the opportunities for 'taking up' the cues a parent gives.

Zone of Proximal Development. A third function of discourse is its mediation of a person's ability to learn with others beyond what he or she might learn alone. I will borrow from Vygotsky (Wertsch, 1991) the term Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). For the purpose of this study, the ZPD is used more universally than in a social constructivist definition. According to Burbules (1993, p 122), ZPD designates:

> a 'state of readiness' in which a student will be able to make certain kinds of conceptual connections, but not others: anything too simple for the student will quickly become boring; anything too difficult will quickly become demoralizing.

This state of readiness is the point at which the student's range of possible meaning and the teacher's range of possible meaning is near enough to come together through the work of dialogue and shared experiences to construct shared understandings. Thus dialogue between student and more knowledgeable others is not a matter of one overpowering another through the use of words until the weaker acquiesces; rather, the dialogue provides the means to generate a common language which allows them to be "comprehensible" to each other (Burbules, 1993 p.113). Gadamer describes the results of

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intersubjective dialogue as the creation of a "fusion of horizons" for the participants (Burbules, 1993, p 111) or, as I have described, a merging of the ranges.

Intersubjectivity. Language functions as a mediational tool that allows for thought development and idea formation (Wertsch, 1991). In light of this, teaching becomes less of a transmission of static information and more a joint construction of understanding (Cazden, 1988; Barnes, et al, 1990). This involves a concept called intersubjectivity. The goal setting and definition of a problem situation that encompasses both participants' views can be considered intersubjective. Intersubjectivity occurs when one conversational participant (be it peer, or elder) interacts with another in such a manner as to encourage the construction of shared understandings through this dialogue. A dialogue involving all participants demonstrates total involvement in actively working to achieve a shared understanding of the situation at hand. A redefining of the focal situation must be accomplished which generates a joint perspective. The work of the dialogue is to redefine a focal situation to come to shared understandings. Efforts to give explanations and rationales for interpretations and resulting actions about an event can be considered attempts to create intersubjectivity.[4]

A factor, which must be taken into account in order to generate intersubjectivity, is the participants overlapping range of shared understandings. This dialogue must occur within a range that facilitates the creation and negotiation of new information into previously formed ideas and concepts for all participants. All participants in this dialogue have opportunity to consider and restructure their understandings in ways that have not

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[4] A greater or lesser degree of intersubjectivity may be generated based on the longevity of interactions as well as the diversity of participants' social and cultural histories.

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been considered before and allow their individual range of understanding to begin to merge with each other. The individual's range of understanding has developed through a framework of philosophy about teaching and learning. The next section provides an examination of two theories for teaching and learning.

<center>*Teaching and Learning Theory*</center>

Behaviorist Perspective

The general philosophy of western cultures is atomistic and individualistic (Wertsch, 1991). Individuals are said to act in isolation and their speech is based on an assumed independent individual intention. This western disengaged image of self has brought about a sense of a singular meaning being transmitted from a sender to a receiver by the use of words that indicate a "conduit metaphor" (Reddy, 1979). An example of this "conduit metaphor" used in speech is when the speaker asks of a listener, "did you get it?"

Growing up and being educated in the western culture, where a behavioristic perspective (objective and atomistic) permeates action and thinking, encourages educators, parents, and students to think about knowledge in small units that would be learned through repeated presentations. This learning is demonstrated through a student's observable behaviors. Generations of adults have experienced education within this behavioristic framework. In the behaviorist view, learners are considered either passive or reactive in relationship to their environment. The teacher, as information dispenser, is responsible for getting just the right arrangement of information so the students can get "it." The teacher is the active dispenser and arranger of information while the student is the passive receiver.

<center>15</center>

As a behaviorist, learning is "nonpurposive habit formation demonstrated through a change in observable, (physiological) overt behavior. These habits are formed through conditioning" (Bigge & Shermis, 1992, p. 75). Teaching is, according to Skinner, "the arrangement of contingencies of reinforcement which expedite learning" (Bigge & Shermis, 1992, p. 110). The main purpose of teaching is to transmit a culture to children and youth (Bigge & Shermis, 1992). Teachers are to shape proper responses, thereby being responsible for inducing in students the behaviors specified in the behavioral objectives. Historically the behaviorist family of psychological thought has had preeminence (Gagne, 1985; Skinner, 1953). In the next paragraph this perspective is applied to knowledge about literacy that individuals may possess.

Parents and teachers have extensive experiences from which a behaviorist's view of reading as mastery of individual elements and skills was used. The ability to repeat letter names, individual units such as phonemes and graphemes, and finally verbalizing whole words was the sequence of reading instruction. Breaking word knowledge into small sub-units in a teacher-identified order, which must be learned in a teacher-identified order was the accepted instructional process. Reading was considered the process of decoding orally, if children understood a passage and yet was unable to read the passage aloud, they were considered nonreaders (Chall, 1983).

Parents and teachers have experienced comprehension taught as a separate skill with multiple sub-units. A singular view of meaning was generated when reading, since words are a conduit where the meaning has been encoded into a word and the reader simply decodes the meaning of the author. The receiver is passive, the speaker or author is the one with power.

16

Social Constructivist Perspective

Research on learning has recently advanced cognitive theories to the forefront in education. Social constructivist learning theory is one of the theories in the cognitive family of thought. Cognitive theories move explanation of human behavior beyond a stimulus-response conditioning pattern. A social constructivist perspective considers the context of human behaviors and choices. The individual becomes an active part of the environment, both interacting with and upon their environment (Bigge & Shermis, 1992).

Expanding upon the use of language as a conveyor of meaning, the social constructivist considers language to be a thinking device infused with cultures and contexts (Wertsch, 1991). "Learning is a persistent change in knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, or commitments" (Bigge & Shermis, 1992, p. 85).

Jerome S. Bruner, a noted cognitive psychologist, states that learners are "information processors, thinkers and creators" (Bigge & Shermis, 1992, p. 123). The social constructivist view presents the learner as transactional, one who actively selects information, forms perceptual hypothesis in the interest of attaining goals. This view of teaching and learning allows for sense making by the learner based on the total context of the immediate and past environments of the participants. Brunner explains the process of education as consisting of "being able to distance oneself in some way from what one knows by being able to reflect on one's own knowledge" (Bigge & Shermis, 1992, p. 123).

The teacher, in the social-constructive perspective, takes on the role of facilitator, using techniques such as direct instruction, modeling and scaffolding (Cazden, 1988) to promote movement of the learners through a sense-making process of the world around

them. The teacher in this view is a co-constructor of meaning while interacting with others around a specific subject. This co-construction of meanings takes place as the dialogic quality of language occurs. The listener attempts to understand the speaker by matching the words spoken with a "counter word" (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 102 in Wertsch, 1991).

Gee writes about this process of understanding as humans being choosers and guessers in establishing meanings for words in specific contexts (Gee, 1990). Therefore, teachers, in this social-cultural perspective, become co-constructors of knowledge in the process of teaching and interacting with the students. Given this social-constructivist view, it is not unreasonable to assume that teachers and parents are also constructors of meaning during the parent-teacher conference. Since teachers and parents bring specific contextualized knowledge of the student to the parent-teacher conference they will be engaged in co-constructing a shared view of how the student is able to learn and best demonstrates his/her learning. This co-construction of meanings has some societal restrictions. These societal boundaries are also embedded in the experience teachers, parents and students have had and what sense they made of the experiences. These boundaries are often so embedded in our institutions that we are unaware of the effects they have on our choices of meanings inferred and language response (Gee, 1990).

School as an Institution

As the public school movement solidified, schools became more centralized and parents' choices about instruction and content were greatly limited. Then, as legislators and educators sought to professionalize teacher status, control the curriculum and the

organizational aspects of schools through institutions, i.e., public schools. The separate

institutions of family and school possess the potential to be exclusively encompassing

(Goffman in Lightfoot, 1978, p. 188), acting as though each are totally separate entities.

Schools with this encompassing tendency may build intangible walls, which discount the

meaningfulness of life outside of itself, and operate as though the individual participants'

lives are totally within and separate from any meaningful, valuable outside influences

(Ibid.). Out of this encompassing tendency grows the impression that only what occurs in

school is a "real" picture of the student's performance ability. One documented example

of this perspective is in Denny Taylor's research as recorded in *Learning Denied* (1991).

In response to this exclusivity, the National Congress of Parents and Teachers

(PTA) was founded with two primary goals: parent education and creating ways for

parents to improve educational conditions for children (Perry & Tannebaum, 1992).

Parents wanted to have a voice and break the exclusiveness of the institution of school.

However, PTAs became in effect, a ritualized way of supporting institutional decisions

and defining the barriers between schools and parents (Lightfoot, 1978). The home and

the school were oppositionally positioned and particularly the parent opposing the

teacher, became the norm as public schooling gained momentum (Perry & Tannebaum,

1992). Parents had struck compromises in supporting schooling; they sent their children

to school with hopes that they would gain a larger piece of the "American Dream" (status

and goods). Parents have always been aware of the potential losses to their smaller

communities and culture but the hope for "something" better was worth the risk. The

separateness of these two institutions, family and school is a reality. It seems that only in

rhetoric does another picture exist.

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As I began to consider the discourse of parent-teacher conferences and how discourse contributes to or hinders the experience for all participants, I tried to step back and look at all the elements. Other researchers have taken a similar approach. Many people have written about parent-teacher interactions, yet few have focused on the actual discourse in the parent-teacher conference. Discourse is more than words arranged in grammatical structures. One reasonable way to think about discourse is as it functions as an "identity kit" (Gee, 1990 p. 142). The groups within which the speaker functions guide the choice of words, modes of acting, and ways of thinking..

In conducting a thorough literature search about the parent-teacher conference, I found that most of the articles dealt with things like the value of parent-teacher conferences (Wissburn & Eckart, 1992; Lynch, 1992), room arrangement (Knox & Candelaria, 1987), and being prepared with student work (Flood & Lapp, 1989). Yet I found little that addressed the issue of language choice and discourse during the parent-teacher conference.

Parent-Teacher Interaction

Formal parent-teacher interactions have been around since the early 1900s when Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) were formed and instituted as a ritual of schools. School open houses are also an institutionalized ritual introduced by schools to allow parents into the school but only through the terms of schools. While these opportunities for parents and teachers to come together were potentially beneficial, the codes of polite society restrained personal intimate conversations from occurring during such public occasions (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Noting that the societal boundaries of politeness in public would control the range of interaction at these events, schools could point to the

"opportunities for parental involvement" they offer in response to official mandates. Each of these organized events has served to trivialize meaningful individual parent interaction with teachers and others in the school system (Lightfoot, 1975).

Historically, the rhetoric for the involvement of parents in school has taken the form of "parents as volunteers; parents as receivers of information about the school; parents as policy makers; and parents as tutors working with their own children at home" (Rich, 1987, p. 16). The PTA promoted all of these forms of involvement and standardized them, which in the end validated the parent as cookie baker, receiver of information, and observer of policy (Perry & Tannenbaum, 1992).

Parent-teacher conferences have been the traditional avenue to conversing between the home and school. These regularly scheduled conferences serve several functions:

1. To indicate to state agencies that an effort is being made to keep parents informed about the educational progress of their child (interview with teachers and principal of PDS school, 1992).
2. To gain information about the student (Wissburn & Eckart, 1992).

3. To provide opportunities for communication between the home and school regarding the student for the purpose of establishing alliances (Darling, 1988).

4. To exhibit to the community the openness and accountability of the education system to its constituents (Haberman, 1992).

What seemed to be missing was how to think about the words and the resulting meanings that are used with parents during the conference. While the research and articles were informative, information about the nature of the discourse during the actual interactions was limited.

The emerging changes in theories of teaching and learning may create further

misunderstandings when parents and teachers interact. This study considers the impact of

the level of emergent theoretical understanding that teachers have and the theoretical

understanding that parents possess along a continuum of theoretical change as represented

by the drawing below.

Figure 1 Emerging Perspectives

Traditional   ☆   Social Constructivist Views
Behaviorist Views
——→
                          Classroom Teachers

            ☆
——→
Parents
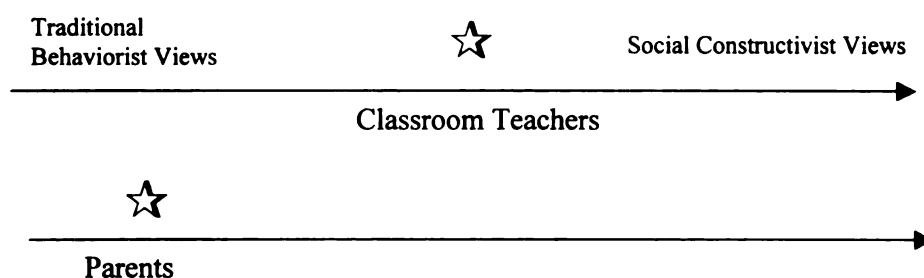
Discourse in the Parent-Teacher Conference

In the parent-teacher conference, language is the primary medium for sharing

information. Language is socially created (Gee, 1990) and therefore has boundaries for

joint understanding across national and social groups. Language is also a tool for

thinking and feeling, along with establishing social identities (Rodriquez, 1982).

Research has documented that institutions also use language for these functions (Fisher &

Todd, 1986; Cazden, 1988).

As a researcher, I asked myself what is embodied in talk that allows some

conferences to be fulfilling and others lacking? What do we project by our word choices

in the parent-teacher conference? What effect does our choice of words have on the

parent-teacher conference? Does a teacher's talk need to be significantly different when

talking with parents than when talking with students? Does the discourse of a parent-teacher conference directly affect the feelings of satisfaction for parents and teachers equally? As I looked through the literature for answers to these questions, I found the need for more definitive information. This void in knowledge about discourse in the parent-teacher conference further motivated me to pursue this study.

This question of choice relates to the locus of power in the parent-teacher conference. Often over the years my own children have appealed to me, as their parent, to not question events at school since they could possibly experience repercussions. Are there repercussions if patients question their doctor? What happens to the doctor if the patient complains about service? Is there a chain of command in place for the medical field, as there is for schools? If parents are dissatisfied they report it to the principal, superintendent, or school board member? As I thought about the application of this analogy of doctor and patient it opened the need to explore how teachers and parents perceive power through the discourse in the parent-teacher conference.

Frequently the traditional model of classroom instruction leaves the student simply "parroting" the words of the one holding the "power," rather than developing an understanding, which will encourage utilization of content in new settings (Barnes et al, 1989). However, misuse in the application of concepts of intersubjectivity and ZPD could also leave students in a state of confusion. For example, teachers who talk with students in ways that indicate the teacher doesn't know and have no idea where information can be found to give direction leaves students feeling like little learning is taking place. Students may feel disoriented in that their original horizon (sense of knowing) is gone without any new horizon to focus on. Arriving at jointly acceptable

explanations and understandings for the time and place participants occupy is one goal of instructional dialogue, thus the fusion of the teacher's and student's horizons.

The concepts of intersubjectivity and ZPD provide ways for students and teachers to further develop their understandings and diminish power differentials. Teachers find it difficult to occupy both an all-knowing position and the position of learner. Further misuse may occur when teachers have not looked thoughtfully and carefully at how they use language in explanations of concepts. Often middle-class European forms of language are the only medium for acceptable responses in a classroom. This form of privileging limits the knowledge that students have for using multiple tools (pictures, oral language, and text) for discourse and often stifles further interaction between students and teacher.

The "zone of proximal development"(ZPD) is an important aspect of talk between teachers and parents. This zone of development is not one of hierarchical maturation (where more years automatically denotes more knowledge), rather it is one of knowledge outside of one's acquired discourse. When teachers use new ideas and meanings that are applied to the old words, such as those employed in literacy discussions then they need to operate within the parent's ZPD to accommodate new understandings. An example of this is when process writing and inventive spelling are used in the classroom with little or no prior explanation given to parents. Parents are unlikely to be familiar with the purpose of these activities regarding the use of these instructional strategies in literacy teaching and learning. Teachers who try to work within the parents' ZPD can create opportunities for parents to extend their understandings by creating opportunities to observe and talk about what these learning and teaching strategies provide. Parents may ask questions

about process writing, either verbally or in written form to generate discussions with the teacher. The teacher thus serves as a resource for new ideas, while the parents share their own ideas regarding appropriate instructional strategies. Through dialogue and demonstration, teachers and parents may create more intersubjectivity regarding what the instruction of literacy skills will look like. Teachers may develop a clearer picture of how wide the differences are between their expectations and desires for instruction in relationship to the community's goals and desires. The parents may also learn from these interactions as they begin to understand that the instructional goals of the teacher and their goals are very similar while the means for arriving at these goals appear quite different.

Teachers who use their knowledge about discourses, genres and ways in which meanings are generated may foster more productive interactions with parents. A teacher using knowledge of referential perspective may be more likely to realize the potential for parents to think and talk about their children in familiar affective ways rather than in the comparative formal school discourses. This realization can help teachers understand why parents may view their child differently than the teacher does.

In addition to issues of power, addressivity is a component of discourse that can provide insight into the notion of positioning. Wertsch (1991) points out that issues of "addressivity or the quality of turning to someone else" are involved in communication but seldom at a conscious level. The consideration of who is being addressed and all of the history and environment that is represented by that person is a part of addressivity, along with the same information about the person doing the speaking. This in-depth thought about who is involved is crucial in the word choices individuals make.

Parent-Teacher Conference Structure

Although D'Evelyn (1945) wrote about parent-teacher conferences 50 years ago, her observations continue to be reviewed and rehearsed today in an effort to improve conversation and interactions between home and school. She addressed such issues as the teacher carrying primary responsibility for the construction of a successful conference by arranging the room to provide an atmosphere of privacy, equality, and congeniality. The teacher is admonished to listen first without judgment, accepting the parent's perspective of the child and events. Teachers need to encourage parents to offer solutions, again with the teachers listening without argument or jumping ahead of the parent and their explanations. Teachers should not give direct advice, remembering parents cannot be objective about their own children. Teachers are to avoid body language that would embarrass the parent or signify approval or disapproval (D'Evelyn, 1945).

Prevailing Model for School and Parent Interactions

Implicit understanding of learning and teaching and doing school exists in the larger population due to the extensive experiences most have had as students. The effects of these experiences remain somewhat hidden to participants. If we view knowledge as something that remains static and is transferred from one individual to another as in the behaviorist tradition, then the teacher is the expert transmitter and knower. Individuals outside of the school institution become the receivers of this specialized knowledge. Schools become viewed as institutions that are not accessible to change or challenge.

The model most frequently adopted for home-school interaction has been unidirectional, the school tells the parents, and then parents tell the students (Wissburn & Eckart, 1992). Parents remain outside the educational circle until summoned. The

following levels identify an example of this unidirectional view of parent-school interaction.

1. The lowest level at which adult caregivers interact with the school is as spectators. At this level of involvement, parents perceive schools as the teachers' turf and parents are not invited in.

2. If parents become more involved, the next level identified is one of active supporter of ideas generated and promoted by the school. Parent-teacher associations (PTA) offer an example of this level of participation. Parents appear at school when summoned and respond appropriately to the school directives.

3. The third level of interaction is one of engagement. A feeling of mutual respect is present on this level. However, the authority of the school and its personnel remains intact. The school continues to be the sole decision-maker. At this level parents may sit on ad-hoc committees and have limited input due to the make up of the committee. Parents are frequently selected for these committee positions by being supportive of ideas previously generated and promoted by the school.

4. The highest level of interaction comes when parents are actively involved in decision-making. A different relationship exists between parent and school at this level. Frequently this level of involvement by a parent is prompted by anger or frustration over the perceived indifference of school leaders creating more of an adversarial or watchdog relationship. In this unidirectional model, the level of involvement appears to be determined by parents, teachers, or administrators equally. However, as adult caregivers voice conflicting views, other adults who are more supportive of school views frequently replace them.

Generally parents interact only from the lowest level of involvement, that of spectator. When parents perceive their child isn't getting a fair deal, they may try to take on role of advocate-supporter at the third-level of engagement. Yet often these efforts are stymied when the parent has little knowledge of negotiating the bureaucracy of schools (INAR/NACIE, 1990). Typically the teachers or administrators view any change of involvement from the spectator level by parent as interference in the educators' domain.

Within this model parents are not valued as equals, rather parents are tolerated or invited

only to support the school mandates (Wissburn and Eckart, 1991).

Factors That Shape Discourse

Whenever parents and teachers come together to talk about school issues, what

they say and how they say it is influenced by four factors: a general world view, views of

teaching and learning, views about school as an institution, and their views about one

another as partners in the education of the child. In this section, I examine each of these

factors in detail. Figure 2 provides a visualization of the complex nature of discourse and

how multiple factors work in constructing meaning and action.

Figure 2 Factors That Shape an Individual's Discourse

General World View
(GWV)

General Teaching &
Learning View

Schools as an
Institution View
(SIV)

Current
Parent-Teacher
Conferences
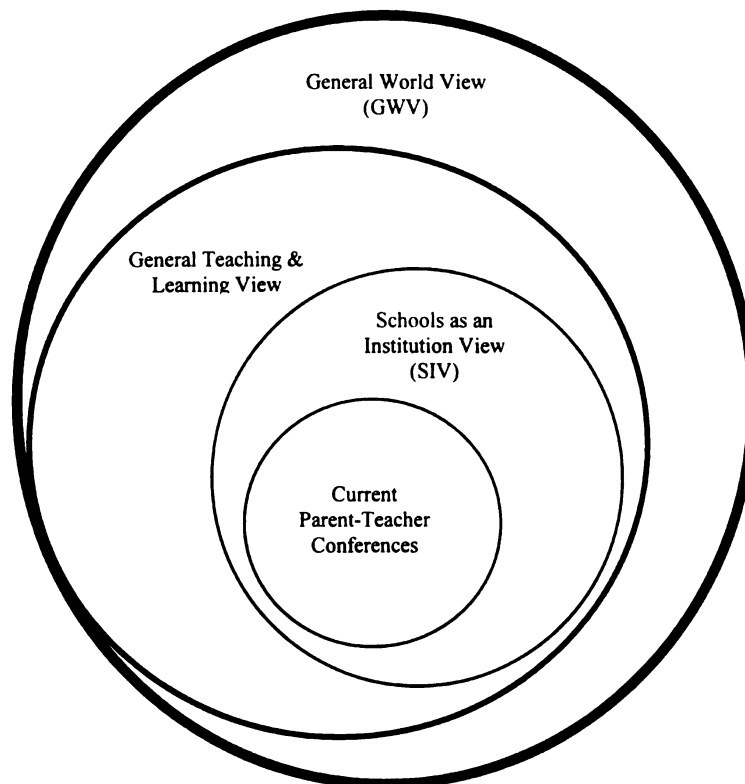
Figure 2 illustrates the factors that shape discourse. The complex nature of discourse is represented by the nesting configuration demonstrating how multiple factors are at work shaping the choices individuals make when they speak. Notice the nested factors are not symmetrical. This conveys the idea that at any given time during an exchange, the conversants will draw upon various factors to process the discourse and make sense of the speakers meaning and formulate responses.

The largest factor that permeates our language choices is our general world view. This world view is developed through our complete life history and all of its interactions with the world and people therein. The next largest contributing factor I consider in this study is an individual's generalized view of teaching and learning. This factor is also quite pervasive in shaping our word choices as we make meanings and communicate with others. The generalized view of teaching and learning includes such elemental things as being taught to laugh, reach, eat, and dress one's self. Our generalized view of teaching and learning also includes other more formal instructional settings such as church, social clubs, and school experiences. This section also includes our understandings of what it means to read, write, and to know. The media and community conversations also influence the formation of our generalized view of teaching and learning. The third factor Figure 2 presents is our view of schools as an institution. This factor encompasses the world view of the value of the formal institution of school as well as our personal experiences in negotiating school as a mandated instructional setting. An individual's sense of the bureaucracy in larger institutions or the responsiveness of small institutions may be at play in this section. This section also includes experiences that were vicarious (not directly involving an individual but observed and the effects touched them in some

manner). For example, your brother was kicked out of a class and you perceived that your parents and siblings were unable to "do" anything to change the consequences. The smallest section represents the individual's experiences with the parent-teacher conference and the participants. This might include such events as being the focus of a parent-teacher conference or being a sibling that was waiting for a conference to finish. It might also include being the parent of other children and having participated in multiple conferences or school personnel interactions.

In this chapter, I have set forth my motivation and purpose for pursuing this study, as well as the questions that have arisen. I defined and highlighted the issues of discourse analysis that seem pertinent to the purpose, cognitive theories and communication factors that shape discourse. In the next chapter, I develop these concepts and issues in more detail as they are applied to literacy instruction and the parent-teacher conference. Chapter 2 provides a context in which to think about the discourse of the parent-teacher conference.

CHAPTER 2

In this chapter, I build on the concepts addressed in Chapter 1 by considering discourse analysis concepts as highlighted in Chapter 1 and their relationship to parent-teacher interactions. Behaviorism and social constructive theories are addressed through the meaning teachers and parents ascribe to learning, teaching, and literacy concepts. In the first segment, I consider how prior literacy knowledge forms the basis for an understanding of common instructional words used in personal communication. I also address the prior knowledge about the school structures for interactions and the prevailing model of school-home, parent-teacher interactions. For example, a consideration of parents' and teachers' responses to past experiences with the institution of school, perceived power usage, and the positioning of individuals in communication involve both an application of discourse elements and social structures, which create environments that may help or hinder a child's achievement. I review the behaviorist statements and the counter view of the social constructive perspective. In the last section of the chapter, I address individual components within the structure of language.

The driving question for me in this study remains: Are any of these theoretical and hypothetical constructs visible in the discourse of the parent-teacher conference? If they can be identified, what effect does this discourse have on the parent-teacher conference and its outcomes? The reader needs to remember that for the purpose of this study, Discourse (with a capital "D") embodies within it, the concept of "ways of being." When the word discourse occurs within the text, with a small "d" it is in reference to the dialogue or language that is within a general context.

As a teacher-educator, I am concerned with helping teachers and parents learn to work together since we know that collaboration between home and school plays a significant role in children's literacy learning. In order to help parents and teachers learn to communicate effectively and work together, a common understanding about concepts of learning and teaching as they relate to students' education in literacy must be present. I have narrowed my consideration of all education to focus on literacy learning since a great many of the conversations in elementary school occur within this context.

Concepts of learning and teaching are deeply embedded in the very culture of our lives and institutions, yet they are seldom collaboratively discussed by those intimately involved in the education process, i.e., education personnel and parents (Heath, 1983).

Since the meanings of words associated with literacy concepts and literacy learning and teaching have changed significantly (Mason & Sinha, 1993) it may be useful to enhance parent and teacher communication concerning children's literacy achievement by establishing a "common ground" of communication needs. Parents and teachers may find it particularly valuable to consider how to make their personal meanings of common school terms like literacy, learning, and teaching understood. Within this study, the discourse of the parent-teacher conference is the focus area for exploring how these new meanings are generated and understood between parents and teachers.

Cautionary Note

In this segment I separate elements of social constructivism to facilitate discussion, but in reality, a social constructivist perspective does not function in discreet bits and pieces. Due to the overlapping and interactive nature of social constructivist thinking, when played out in instructional strategies and learning, misunderstandings can

occur between more traditional modes of teaching, which stress transmission and more transformative explanations of learning and teaching that grow out of social constructivism. For example, social constructive concepts may tend to blur the more traditional lines of demarcation between the learner and the teacher as the more knowledgeable other. Further the social embeddedness of teaching and learning which social constructivism acknowledges and forefronts, trends to blur traditional elements of formal teaching and learning.

I have made some arbitrary decisions regarding which elements to discuss. Breaking apart social constructivism is much like trying to divide equally a puddle of mercury. The pieces that I have pinched off for discussion focus on thought and language. While referential perspective, intersubjectivity, zone of proximal development and positioning are only a few of the options possible, these are central to this consideration of teaching and learning. In order to understand what I consider to be evidence of a social constructive perspective, one needs to understand the theoretical framework of social constructivism out of which this evidence grows.

Teachers and Parents Together

As people move from place to place across the United States, it may become more difficult for consistent understandings of learning and teaching to develop (Chapter 1). Bakhtin presents the idea that social language is "a discourse peculiar to a specific stratum of society (professional, age group, and so on) within a given social system at a given time" (Holquist and Emerson, 1981, p. 430). This provides valuable insight for analyzing what parents and teachers believe they are communicating. When teachers grew up understanding the meanings of language as they were used in their local

community and where they then took a teaching position few misunderstandings occurred. Now as teachers travel to new areas and interact with other individuals who may have differing language patterns and understandings, the potential for misunderstandings increase. The uniformity of words often hides the variance in meanings from one societal locale to another. In the next section, I cover the variance in meanings around literacy instruction.

A Behaviorist View of Literacy Teaching, Learning, and Parent Involvement

Earlier in this chapter I briefly defined and addressed cognitive theory of behaviorism and social constructivism. In behaviorist thought, approaches to learning and knowledge have varying levels of difficulty presented in an established hierarchy. Earlier and easier levels of knowledge are instructed prior to the introduction of what is perceived to be more difficult concepts. The very metaphors that educators use to explain how ideas are taught and learned indicate a sense in which knowledge is encoded, packaged as a single meaning and transmitted to another individual who passively decodes the knowledge with the single meaning remaining intact (Wertsch, 1991). The initiator of this knowledge transfer is uniquely qualified by having attained more time in institutions of higher learning, thereby making the teacher an authority. Jackson (1986) points out that students (and by extension their parents) recognize the power and authority that teachers have in the classroom. Possessing a position in an educational institution thereby assumes more knowledge and infers more power (Labaree, 1992).

An authoritative discourse may often be at work during student-teacher and parent-teacher interactions. This authoritative discourse may create the positioning of participants in relationship to power and authority as a function of language. An

authoritative discourse assumes that text or utterances demand an "unconditional

allegiance" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 78). This authoritative discourse is fused with its

institution, in this case, the school. Frequently, teachers, students, and parents are

unknowingly powerless by this type of discourse. A Native American parent shared this

example.

> I am a parent and was involved in Head Start because of the parent
> involvement component written into that program. However, when our
> son went into kindergarten, our involvement trailed off. I don't know if
> that was because we were intimidated by the teachers, if we were
> somehow discouraged from participating, or if we were made not to feel
> welcome (INAE/NACIE, 1990, p. 2).

This excerpt is not sufficient for us to determine why this parent ceased to

participate in his/her child's schooling, yet the parents clearly perceived their involvement

was no longer valued.

Educators are often seen as generating negative communication experiences. In

research done by Lindle (1989) regarding parents' expectations, teachers' professionalism

was identified as an undesirable component. It promoted a perceived attitude of "too

businesslike," "patronizing," and "being talked down to." A response, regarding parental

concerns, from one principal indicated, "sometimes people don't know what is best for

them" (p. 13). This type of comment supports parents' perceptions that the school tends

to ignore or respond inappropriately to parents' questions or desires. When we realize

that an individual's theories can imbue language with a variety of meanings,

miscommunication and confusion are the logical outcome. If behaviorism theory is an

educator's basis for word choice and authoritative language is the norm, then teachers'

and parents' misunderstandings are bound to increase over time. Language and meanings

are contexualized in prior experiences and wise teachers acknowledge the need and provide time for additional explanation and clarification when communicating.

A Social Constructive View of Literacy Teaching, Learning and Parent Involvement

Parents and teachers can be encouraged to view the home experiences and adult caregivers' expertise as valuable to the literacy progress of children. Parents in the home provide organization and control of the elements of literacy tasks that are at first too difficult for their child to accomplish independently. As the child gains competency in the use of literacy elements, i.e., sentence structures and communication styles, independence in using the elements grows. Children arrive at school with a variety of understandings about literacy as acquired in their homes. Teachers support the use of home literacies as tools for addressing issues and bridging cultural differences. These cultural contexts, which are perceived as strengths, have the potential to provide socially significant contexts for involvement. Taylor (1983) has pointed out that these socially significant contexts are what characterize families of successful readers.

Historically, becoming literate was considered to be an isolated achievement that occurred in a formal school setting. Today, becoming literate is recognized as a process of acquiring literacy through home and other out-of-school interactions, as well as through the learning that occurs in the formal instruction of school (Gee, 1991). Diaz and Mehan (1986) confirmed this view as they studied Mexican families in San Diego. Other projects like the Navajo Parent-Child Reading Program (INAR/NACIE, 1990) shows the possibilities of this alternative view of home-school involvement. The crucial component becomes an attitude exhibited by the school and teachers that must answer the question: How can we draw on parents' knowledge and experience to inform instruction? This

approach would foster a new formulation of what counts as literacy, broadening the definition to include socially situated events inside and outside school.

In industrialized nations, being literate allows one to have a sense of power as well as create a sense of harmony. Being literate is more than having skills to manage print and oral communication through knowledge of elements such as letters, morphemes, graphemes, words, grammar rules, and so on. In addition to this knowledge of elements, being literate in the social constructivist perspective is the ability to compare ideas, respond to others through written text or oral language, argue and analyze in an organized manner (Heath, 1991). Currently some language researchers are examining the meanings and functions of language from a social constructivist perspective. This definition of literacy is much more complex than the folk view that many western adults hold. Today being literate is more than get "it" (the meaning from print). Being literate now continuously places individuals in positions of being more reflective in their interactions and thinking. Gee (1991) states that literacy may be learned and acquired, where acquisition is:

> a process of acquiring something subconsciously by exposure to models
> and a process of trial and error, without a process of formal teaching. It
> happens in natural settings, which are meaningful and functional in the
> sense that the acquirers know that they need to acquire something in order
> to function and they in fact want to so function. This is now most people
> come to control their first language (p. 146).

Work by a number of notable authors has supported this shifting perspective (Teale and Sulzby, 1986; Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1983). Literacy in this view as expressed by Taylor (1983) is a dynamic process of immeasurable complexity that moves imperceptibly with the family, accommodating to the personal experiences of individual

family members, and taking shape in the enduring events of their combined life histories. Each family member's experience of print is personally constructed as well as socially owned, so that what is literacy to one may not be literacy to another. Within this context children learn of print as a social enterprise as well as a solitary endeavor and, from this perspective, we can begin to appreciate the plurality of literacies that are a part of a child's world. Common elements in this emergent view are:

1. Literacy emerges before children are formally taught to read.

2. Literacy is defined to encompass the whole act of reading, not merely decoding.

3. The child's point of view and active involvement with emerging literacy constructs is featured.

4. The social setting for literacy learning is not ignored (Mason & Sinha, 1993).

Gee's idea of Discourse as an identity kit is useful when thinking about the ways we learn and acquire literacy. This kit is complete with appropriate costume and script regarding how to talk and act so others will recognize our role. Such a theory provides interesting insight into some of the confusion that occurs within the classroom as well as potential for dissonance or barriers to understanding in the communication between parents and teachers. As generations transition substantial differences of view have emerged in how a teacher and student may behave. This idea of an identity kit is also supported by the Baktinian approach to meaning and Vygotsky's list of psychological tools (maps, language, symbol systems, and so on) that incorporates various mediational mans for communicating (Wertsch, 1991, p. 105).

Gee goes on to define learning as:

A process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching, though not necessarily from someone officially designated as teacher. This teaching involves explanation and analysis, that is breaking down the thing to be learned into its analytic parts. It inherently involves attaining, along wit the matter being taught, some degree of meta-knowledge about the matter (1991, p. 146).

With these distinctions in mind, we can say that acquired literacy is control of the language of the primary discourse of a student and control of the language of the home and the associated culture. Whereas, learning literacy involves being taught within a secondary discourse, that of the school and its associated culture, thereby being able to talk about literacy components is a part of school learning. The ability to function with mastery as well as full and effortless control, in any discourse comes through acquisition not learning (Gee, 1991). So literacy is mastered through acquisition by exposure to models in natural, meaningful, and functional settings and current schools are not known for providing such a setting.

Literacy Includes Language, Thought, Meaning and Action

Within the social constructivist perspective, the concept of language embraces issues of thought, meaning, and action. Vygotsky asserts that thought is a creation of social language functions to create language (Wertsch, 1991). This means that language and meaning are developed through interaction within a social setting, i.e., people and events. As children make sense of their interactions within a social group, they develop the language to communicate within that social group. For example, children develop the ability to think about experiences, acquire language and construct meanings that facilitate and mediate social action. Their first experiences with language are intermental, in that they occur by language use and experiences with others in a social setting. Children then

39

develop individual (intra) mental functioning based on the specific structures and processes of the society and language of which they are a part. This intramental activity is then exposed through language approximations on the intermental plane. These approximations are reinforced, extended, or extinguished by the social group's response. Thus, different ways of thinking (intramental functioning) and speaking grow out of differing social experiences (intermental functions) (Wertsch, 1991).

How might this social constructivist concept of language and thought play out in the school interactions with students? One exhibit shows a teacher embracing the social constructivist perspective of language and thinking through the use of emergent literacy concepts. Another exhibit of social constructivist theory for instruction includes the use of appropriate process-oriented means for teaching reading and writing. Process writing programs (Graves, 1983) are another example of a social constructivist instructional approach. Social constructivists encourage students to get their ideas transferred into text form using any means that works for them, as a rough draft, i.e., draw pictures, note taking, or dictation. This draft may include nonconventional ways of spelling words as well as approximations of conventional language in the initial stages of text. Students may bring many different forms to their writing construction as well as invented or temporary spelling patterns that allow them to express their ideas. Perhaps the home environment has fostered labeling, list making, or telegraphic type notes (e.g., "garbage" reminds child to complete chores) so a student's beginning efforts may utilize such prior knowledge. By implementing the process approach to instruction in reading and writing, children are provided the opportunity to operate on the intermental plane through editing

and peer conferences and through the intramental plane as they develop and internalize new skills and understandings needed for school literacy.

Further examples of a social constructivist perspective in literacy would involve inviting students to interact orally with one another in peer conferences around other written text. Such an example could be a strategy that encourages children to orally predict, reflect, and question text as it is being read in order to gain an understanding of the ideas a story may contain.

We cannot automatically assume, however, that when teachers use process-oriented instruction in reading and writing they are embracing the social constructive perspective. Some teachers approach instruction in an eclectic manner (Hatton, 1989). They may use instructional strategies without understanding the theoretical foundations of the strategy. For example, if a teacher chose to use process-oriented instruction such as writer's workshop and still held to the belief that there is only one right way to write, the teacher would thereby set rigid criteria that would still force the students to guess what the teacher wanted, rather than explore and form their own thoughts and ideas. The probable outcome would be excessive confusion of both content and process. The need to alleviate this confusion for students would motivate a social constructivist teacher to draw upon additional elements of constructivist theory such as referential perspective, zone of proximal development, intersubjectivity, and positioning.

Referential Perspective

A language issue that a teacher operating within a sociocultural framework could consider is the "referential perspective" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 109) of the speaker in giving explanations and answers. This referential perspective relates to the ways in which

speakers express themselves in relationship to what they believe the hearer is able to understand or expects. Bakhtin (Wertsch, 1991) stated that utterances play off from the hearer and are not indifferent, independent or self-sufficient. This knowledge helps the teacher form appropriate responses that encourage generative interaction. When students give answers that may differ from what a teacher anticipated during the Initiation, Response, Evaluation pattern (IRE), the teacher has an opportunity to use generative interaction (Mehan, 1979; Cazden, 1988). If a student offers a variant answer, a teacher, with knowledge of how utterances play off of the hearer, may ask the child to explain why he/she gave that answer. Traditionally, teachers simply respond in a manner that indicates the incorrectness of the answer and move on to another student for the correct answer as though it exists apart from the student's personal knowledge. When the teacher is able to distinguish among speech genres and social languages of students in the classroom, they are engaging in the literate behaviors advocated by Gee.

Gee (1991) defines literacy as "control of secondary uses of language (i.e., uses of language in secondary discourses)." A Discourse is the way an individual uses language which instantiates and gives body to their individual communication. Children are often examples of the meeting point of many developing Discourses (Gee, 1990). The discourse of Trackton children was insufficient to manage and gain acceptance within the classroom where instructional discourse was the norm (Heath, 1983). Only as teachers begin to consider their own discourse styles and those of other children within the classroom are they able to rethink their views regarding what is occurring in the classroom.

Teachers within a social constructivist framework demonstrate an awareness of potential confusion due to the multiple meanings of many words. Discourses use the same words and yet generate differing responses in relationship to the cultural setting in which they were acquired. Teachers need to consider the potential for misunderstandings. An example may be when the teacher uses the words, "Sam, the door," intending for Sam to close it after entry. Students unfamiliar with such implicit meanings may be unaware of the appropriate response to such a phrase. Constructivist teachers give explicit directions, ask clarifying questions, or recontextualize a student's utterance in a reflective manner in order to confirm meaning.

Wertsch (1991) gives an example of recontextualizing with his recounting of a teacher and child interaction about a piece of lava. Wertsch's teacher, however, did little to reinforce the value of the student's account. The child (Danny) began to share about his lava in a familiar affective frame of reference, with this statement; "I've always been, um, taking care of it. It's never fallen down and broken" (Wertsch, 1991 p. 113-114). The teacher interjects, "uh hum. Okay. Is it rough or smooth?" to reframe the explanation into dichotomous scientific terms. The child then extended this categorization by indicating that it was rough and extending the comparative words with, "and it's sharp."

As the conversation continued, the teacher moved away from the child's initial efforts at sharing about the familiar affective qualities of the rock to a scientific definition and discussion about volcanoes and so on (Wertsch, 1991, p. 113-115). The teacher's move toward the scientific definition was an effort to "decontextualize" the talk from the

student's original contextualization and recontextualize it into classroom discourse, which exhibits a classroom genre's specific "indexical" characteristics (Ochs, 1988).

The student may learn from this interaction that multiple ways of describing items may be employed when the teacher invited the students to reflect on the way both she and the student talked about the same item. However, as in Danny's case, the potential for the student to feel robbed of his story in relationship to the lava is also there. A further possible outcome of this recontextualization by the teacher might have been that the student discontinued sharing spontaneously due to anger or the frustration of not having his efforts accepted. Michaels (1981) gives an example of a student's efforts (Deena) to share during show and tell and her resulting frustration with the teacher's inability to recognize the value of her efforts.

Given the ideas about social constructive concepts, the above examples took a different turn when interactions involved children of cultural backgrounds different than the teacher. When the teacher uses knowledge from a social constructivist perspective, that teacher takes time to validate a child's knowledge gained from other settings as well as to extend ways of knowing from new perspectives. Teaches gain new understandings as they talk with students about their perspectives as well as expand a student's perspectives by introducing knowledge about appropriate versus less appropriate matches of Discourses, ways of knowing and situated usage.

In her research Michaels (1981) shows how confusion occurs when the implicit expectations of a teacher are not forthcoming in a student's response. Deena, a first grade child, expressed her frustration with the teacher's interruptions during her sharing time by accusing the teacher of interrupting and diminishing the importance of her story. Often

teachers are confused when a child like Deena grows angry and refuses to "get to the point," or another child refuses to respond during class discussions even though they have right answers. As teachers utilize their knowledge about referential perspectives, they may become more sensitive to the need to understand the other social constructivist concept, Zone of Proximal Development for the purpose of making connections and understanding the ideas of others.

Intersubjectivity

Language is considered a mediational tool that allows for thought development and idea formation (Wertsch, 1991). In light of this, teaching becomes less of a transmission of static information and more a joint construction of understanding (Cazden, 1988; Barnes, et al, 1989). The goal setting and definition of a problem situation that encompasses both participants' views can be considered intersubjective. A dialogue involving all participants demonstrates total involvement in actively working to achieve a shared understanding of the situation at hand. A redefining of the focal situation must be accomplished which generates a joint perspective. The work of the dialogue is to redefine a focal situation to come to shared understandings. Efforts to give explanations and rationales for interpretations and resulting actions about an event can be considered attempts to create intersubjectivity.[5] A factor, which must be taken into account in order to generate intersubjectivity, is the participants' overlapping range of shared understandings. This dialogue must occur within a range that facilitates the creation and negotiation of new information into previously formed ideas and concepts for all participants. All participants in this dialogue have opportunity to consider and restructure

their understandings in ways that have not been considered before and allow their individual range of understanding to begin to merge with each other.

Application of Intersubjectivity and Zone of Proximal Development

This "state of readiness" was referenced in Chapter 1. In many classrooms, teachers give little consideration to preparing of students to facilitate conceptual connections. This involves a concept called intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity occurs when one conversational participant (be it peer, or elder) interacts with another in such a manner as to encourage the construction of shared understandings through this dialogue.

How does this social constructive theoretical construct of intersubjectivity become activated in instructional practices? Using strategies of modeling and scaffolding, (Cazden, 1988) the interactive structure of dialogue makes the cognitive strategy or strategies possible between novice and more knowledgeable other. When a knowledgeable person demonstrates through explicit examples, the strategies and content, which is learned during an interaction between student and teacher, then the learning environment is conducive to promoting levels of intersubjectivity. Through repetitive cycles of modeling and scaffolding, supported through step-by-step explanations, participants develop a common understanding.

One example of a repetitive cycle of modeling and scaffolding is reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984), which is a dialogue between student and teacher, in which participants take turns assuming the position of the teacher. The teacher models questioning and reasoning, then moves to scaffolding as the student approximates the teacher role of questioning and reasoning. The teacher acts as a scaffold maintainer by

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[5]   Greater or lesser degrees of intersubjectivity may be generated based on the longevity of interactions

supporting or withdrawing parts of the scaffold as students demonstrate their adeptness with reasoning and questioning. As the participants have opportunities to participate in this process, they begin to internalize ways of thinking and talking that may be new. This process of reciprocal teaching allows all participants to be involved in the creation of language that facilitates the "fusion of horizons."

Another insight into student and teacher interactions comes from the work of Heath (1983), which focused on the variance of language usage and understandings within communities. Heath's research highlights how children experience different language patterns at home that are not always sufficient for understanding language use in school. In her research, Heath observed families from three different groups of people in several Piedmont communities. The people, referred to as Town people, consist of mainstream black and white families. Trackton and Roadville are communities of working class black and white families.

When Trackton parents wanted children to do something, they simply stated, "go to bed." When Trackton children went to school and the teacher would say, "Shall we take our language books out?" the Trackton children assumed it was an actual question, which gave room for a negative reply. This type of miscommunication would then create a negative response from the teacher toward specific children. When teachers began to audiotape student's questions and answers as they worked with materials in predetermined centers, they became more aware of how both Trackton and Roadville children used and understood questions. The teachers then adjusted their instruction according to this new knowledge and the overall student performance improved. With

as well as the diversity of participants' social and cultural histories.

knowledge of Heath's work, teachers embracing a social constructivist perspective become more conscious of their communication patterns and the confusion they may generate for children, rather than immediately assume that the children are deficit in either intelligence or cooperation.

Within this view of language usage, the teacher develops an acceptance of a variance in children's language usage and thinking processes rather than quickly applying a label that indicates an intellectual deficit. A teacher in the social constructivist perspective would be aware of the need to listen carefully to student responses in order to facilitate operating in the optimal zone for each child in the classroom. This careful listening generates more opportunities to consider each student's referential perspective, allow the teacher to identify the ZPD that is appropriate for maximum learning to occur, generate an opportunity to develop an intersubjective approach to ideas and concepts thereby positioning the student as a valued learner. The concept of positioning involves issues of power that may create or diminish resistance to change and new ideas.

Positioning

Davies and Harre (1991), state that:

persons as speakers acquire beliefs about themselves which do not necessarily form a unified coherent whole. They shift from one to another way of thinking about themselves as the discourse shifts and as their positions within varying story lines are taken up (p. 58).

In this study, the idea of positioning is one which occurs in an "immanentist's view" (Davies & Harre, 1991, p. 44). This view places the conversants in a frame of time that is perceived as real. What is said and responded to provides the information that creates reality. Michaels' work (1981) illustrates how positioning may be played out in a

classroom situation. Deena expressed her frustration in her efforts to share her story during formal sharing time when the teacher continued to interrupt her account of an event. Deena's belief about herself and her abilities to "share" is being restructured in this "sharing time" event. The teacher's inability to understand or "take up" Deena's story line is changing Deena's perceived position in the event and the classroom. This occurred in first grade, at the end of the year and Deena was still struggling with the teacher's request to talk about only one thing. The resulting affect was to position Deena in opposition to the teacher. Deena had been challenged in her ability to "share" a story in classroom discourse style and being unable to make sense of the teacher's prompts, Deena reacted in anger and frustration.

> Sharing time got on my nerves. She was always interruptin' me sayin,
> 'That's not important enough,' and 'I hadn't hardly started talkin'!..! I felt
> like slappin' her upside the head,...sayin' well it's important to me, so you
> just listen when I'm talkin' to you woman! (Michaels, 1981, p. 321)

In this outburst we can hear Deena trying to reconcile her beliefs about herself and how she has been able to communicate in her previous home environment to what is currently happening to her in the classroom setting. The ways in which she may position herself over time in relationship to the demands of this new discourse environment remain to be seen. Students may accommodate their current patterns of discourse, which have previously been reinforced and praised, to the norms of the classroom setting or they may be resistant and cling to what has worked assuming the teacher to be the one that needs to change. Deena seemed to be responding in this last form.

Embedded in this element of positioning is the issue of power, power that is both personal and institutional. If we go back to Heath's (1983) research on language use

differences for children from Trackton, Roadville, and Town, we can see how a discourse community affects positioning in classroom discourse. The children of Trackton and Roadville both had difficulty with indirect requests like, we have visitors coming to our classroom and we want it to look nice. Roadville children possessed knowledge about space-function ties and would respond to the indirect request by putting their toys away where they belonged, but the children from Trackton would be frustrated by the time constraints placed on their play and often refused to put the toys away. Trackton children were unfamiliar with indirect requests as well as the concept of objects (toys) having a "place." This lack of school knowledge then positioned the Trackton children as recalcitrant or defiant, limiting their power to gain praise.

Wertsch (1991) refers to the power differential between student and teacher in his discussion of the "speech genre of formal instruction." This power differential is displayed by an abundance of teacher directives in instruction. Students on the other hand seldom utter anything that could be construed to be a directive when interacting with teachers. Heath (1983) points out that students from the homes of the Town people are already familiar with the forms that directives take in formal instruction, whereas the students from Trackton or Roadville have lesser degrees of familiarity with classroom discourse, particularly the genre of formal instruction.

Returning to Davies and Harre's quote regarding the acquisition of beliefs about one's self as occurring through the various shifts in discourse challenges teachers' awareness of the variant discourse styles, concurrent meaning-making goes on by all participants within any classroom.

Armed with this theoretical base, classroom teachers may be better able to consider how to structure interaction so participants in communication are able to save "face" as well as learn. This acquisition of beliefs about self can be much less painful when the teacher consciously designs instruction that allows students to learn with the least amount of pain and frustration. For example, the sharing about the lava rock that (Wertsch, 1991, p. 113-115) Danny brought to school could have been more his story if the teacher had allowed Danny to tell his version of the lava rock story without imposing a new referential perspective during the initial telling. The teacher could have chosen to delay her use of power to interrupt and interject her ideas even though she wanted to make some points regarding the lava rock that are worthwhile and valid. This new referential perspective of scientific language could just as easily be accomplished after allowing Danny to complete his story perspective. Danny's information then could be the base for further learning in a new discourse style while allowing his style to be valued. The teacher could share power with students by waiting for students to complete their stories, and then expand with the new contextualization or perspective, which school discourse values.

The elements of social constructivist perspective that I have addressed thus far have been applied to interactions between teacher and student. However, the students and teacher are but two of three communicating participants in the educational arena. Parents are a crucial component in the education of children as researcher and policy analysts have indicated (Kaplan, 1992; Heath, 1983).

I have raised a number of questions in this consideration of basic underlying philosophical theories of learning and teaching. I have tried to demonstrate the need for

research into the discourses being used in the teacher-parent exchange. Perhaps as researchers explore discourse, teachers and parents can gain greater understanding by sharing information.

General World View

Our world view is one factor that helps shape the choices individuals make in discourse formation. Within our general world view we hold some generalized understandings of how our world operates. This world view is a response to our personal experiences, the media, and reminiscence of times gone by.

Illusions and perspectives

Schools and homes have always been two separate institutions; yet they are linked together as partners in educating children. For example a popular picture of the home and school connection has been created in part by the television version of *Little House on the Prairie*. As we think of our historical roots in America, the picture we are likely to conjure up is of hard-working, moral, rural folk living a life of trials, subsistence, simplicity and peacefulness. The illusion is one of uniform, sensible, and sympathetic communities where values were shared and remained unquestioned and unmentioned. This popular presentation of early education and community cooperation created in many of us a desire for a simpler time and place, "the good old days."

Margaret Mead (1951) in her ethnographic study *The School in American Culture* expands on the idyllic image of the home-school connection as a flawless and silent agreement between schools, as promoters of a better way of life, and families anxious to consume the learning that was dispensed. Her style depicts teachers as a part of the total community and even an extension of the students' families. The teacher often lived with

the students' families while school was in session. While a nice depiction, this idyllic view is not reality. Lightfoot (1975) has given ample reason for dispelling the myth of the "little red school-house" (p. 15) and its perceptual contribution to parent-teacher conferences.

The picture of schools in *Growing Up in America* by Harvey Graff (1987) is also a far cry from this dream-like quality of "the little red schoolhouse." Students didn't eagerly attend school to expand their minds and further their economic potential. Rather, students often moved fluidly between conflicting roles as very young workers and sometimes student.

As humans, we design our own realities by the language that surrounds us and our perceptions of events. Attendance at school and participation in hours of media presentations via television lead people to create their own realities. These memories are lovely possessions, however inaccurate they may be. To remember is to reconstruct what we perceived took place. Frequently these reconstructions are inadequate re-presentations of events yet we make decisions and operate on these reconstructions as though they were "fact." The facts we have collected become a part of our being and language. Though we may operate out of these storehouses of "reconstructions," it is often at the edges of our minds that we even entertain different perspectives.

Beliefs

Our illusions and perspectives generally play out in what we call our beliefs. These beliefs grow out of our responses to experiences in society and culture. Such factors as our nature as well as nurturing are at work in forming these beliefs. All of these factors form the basis for the choice of words people use when expressing certain ideas. The

way in which language is acquired and learned reflects an individual's beliefs. In order to think about words and meaning, one must choose to consider the underlying belief structures, which prompt language and thinking. In the next section I examine two cognitive theories of literacy teaching and learning that are embedded in of these beliefs.

Parents and teachers have extensive experiences from which a behaviorist's view of reading as mastery of individual elements and skills was used. The ability to repeat letter names, individual units such as phonemes and graphemes, and finally verbalizing whole words was the teacher-controlled sequence of reading instruction. Reading was considered the process of decoding (Chall, 1983).

Parents and teachers have experienced comprehension taught as a separate skill with multiple sub-units. When reading, parents and teachers generated a singular view; since words convey meaning, as readers, they decoded the meaning of the author. The receiver is passive, the speaker or author is the one with power.

Letter formation and mechanics are the focal point for writing instruction for a behavioristic western adult. Rules for written expression are often identified, demonstrated and practiced in decontextualized isolated exercises. Individual letters must be formed in a predetermined fashion before a student can be considered literate. Spelling and vocabulary instruction are separate subjects often taught in isolation from context. Frequent use of repetitive practice sheets and programmed materials are a staple in the behaviorist tradition. Learning and knowing have a very definitive pattern for the behaviorist. School knowledge such as work sheets, pages of mathematical computations, fill in the blanks, and so on, as well as objective test experiences make acceptable exhibits of learning. This explanation of literacy from the two cognitive

theories has provided great potential for mixed messages as the figure in Chapter 1 alluded. This emerging consciousness of theoretical conflict may be a contributing factor in the uneasiness experienced during the parent-teacher conference. The next section of text directs attention to parent-teacher interactions. The discourse and structure of the conference provides ample opportunity for conflict and dissatisfaction.

Parent-Teacher Communication

In the behaviorist perspective, educators often see communication experiences as negative. In researching the expectations of parents, Lindle (1989) found that parents identified teachers' professionalism as an undesirable component. Parents perceived teachers as having attitudes of "too businesslike," "patronizing," and "being talked down to." A response, regarding parental concerns, from one principal indicated, "sometimes people don't know what is best for them" (p. 13). This type of comment supports parents' perceptions that the school tends to ignore or respond inappropriately to parents' questions or desires. When we realize that individual philosophies can imbue language with a variety of meanings, miscommunication and confusion are the logical outcome. Teachers' and parents' misunderstandings are bound to increase over time if language is contexualized in prior experiences with little opportunity for explanations of meanings.

Parents come to school as products of their experiences. They may anticipate interactions based on prior experiences as students as well as possible negative interactions with school personnel. Hayes (1987) gives an example of this in

Reconstruction of Educational Experience: The parent conference.

> A Parable: A colleague of mine enjoys telling the story of a man who was stranded by a flat tire on a country road late one evening. Finding himself without an automobile jack, he started the long walk to a farmhouse in the

distance. As the miles stretched on, he began to anticipate what lay ahead. What if no one is home? or they don't have a jack? or they don't even have a phone? What if they won't let me in? As he neared the house, he had worked himself into a rage. When the door to the house was opened at last, he shouted in the face of the astonished farmer: 'Keep your stupid jack and shove it!' (p. 305)

Over the time it took to walk to the house this stranded man began to reflect on prior experiences and arrived at the farmer's house anticipating a negative response to his intended request for help. The farmer, on the other end of the traveler's explosive greeting, is totally baffled. Parents and teachers may have experienced such confusing encounters when communicating. When a parent is summoned to school they may bring with them the anticipation of being positioned as inadequate in some way and therefore prepare for a rebuttal. Hayes continues to identify experiences in which ten percent of parent conferences appeared to be negative and adversarial. Likewise, Sandra Pettapiece (Kaplan, 1992) states "childhood memories of teachers as the authority as well as old feelings about school in general can return and make a parent feel uncomfortable." In work by Trueba, Moll, and Diaz (1982), Spanish-speaking immigrant parents were shown to be hesitant to make contact with schoolteachers for fear of appearing to be imposing into the teacher's territory. An insight to gain here concerns the social expectations and previous experiences of parents and teachers and how they can potentially create expectations and assumptions about future interactions. How do the experiences that parents had relate to reading and writing, affect their involvement in the student's academic progress? In the following section I explore this question.

Literacy and Parental Involvement

When family involvement is viewed as teachers requiring parents to incorporate

school-like literacy activities at home within the family setting, then the social-contextual

demands on family life become obstacles or barriers that must be overcome so that

learning can take place, i.e."Transmission of School Practices" model (Auerbach, 1989).

An adversarial situation between home and school may result when teachers and

parents accept a behavioristic model, in which school literacy practices are the only

accepted avenue toward progress. The teacher's job becomes one to make work on

academic skills manageable and the parent's job is be sure time is taken to complete the

work assigned. When teachers embrace a behaviorist perspective this may form

conflicting assumptions. Table 1 helps to identify the current divergent beliefs within the

two perspectives we discussed earlier.

Table 1 Views Regarding Homes and Literacy Acquisition

Behaviorist Assumptions	Social Constructivist Assumptions
1. Home is a literacy impoverished place (Auerbach, 1989).	Home is a literacy rich place (Snow, et.al. 1991).
2. If families are poor, minority or working class, they don't support or value literacy development (Auerbach, 1989).	Poor, minority, and working class families often view literacy and schooling as the key to mobility within society (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Auerbach, 1989; Rodrigez, 1982; Caplan & Whitmore, 1992).
3. The directionality of literacy interaction is thought to be from parent to child only (Auerbach, 1989).	A reciprocal arrangement often occurs between parent and child for written documents (Snow et al. 1991).
4. It is further assumed that students succeed in school because families do school-like tasks with the children (Auerbach, 1989).	Home literacy tasks are as effective in promoting school achievement as school like tasks (Auerbach, 1989; Lareau, 1989) (Taylor, 1983), (Heath, 1983).
5. If homes and families differ from the middle class Eurocentric model, they are perceived as deficient (Auerbach, 1989).	Family literacy is that broad span of activities and events which is integrated into the warp of all students' lives (Moll, 1990), (Delpit, 1988).

Current Parent-Teacher Conferences

Even though these goals appear to be valuable, the continuous lamenting from both parents and teachers seems to indicate that we still have a vacuous form of communication occurring between individual families and schools. Each goal identified has the potential to draw schools and families closer together, but in actuality the conversations remain at the superficially polite level. One teacher stated that his goal for parent-teacher conferences was to get through them with the least amount of deep interaction or conflict (personal interview with teachers enrolled in a masters level program, 1993).

Lightfoot (1975) has pointed out that communication is the key to assuring parents that schools are an extension of the home not usurping or replacing home instruction. School personnel have espoused an idealistic form of interaction, that of collaboration or partnership. Yet frequently teachers behave differently and are intent on excluding families from school life to insure an exclusive isolated environment free from intrusions of parents (Lightfoot, 1975; Seeley 1981, 1984).

Perhaps the ambiguity of teachers' roles and expectations of parents could offer possible explanations for this paradox. Parents and teachers as "partners in action" is often foiled by the stereotype structure of "professional-client relationship" acted out by parents and teachers. Teachers often welcome only particular types of parent involvement, which they defined as supportive (Lareau, 1985).

Many recent articles for the "how to" of parent-teacher conferences reflect a similar perspective regarding the parent-teacher conference (Gelfer and Perkins, 1987; Ornstein, 1983). While D'Evelyn's (1945) comments are intended to bring participants

together, they really act as distancing devices. Her recommendations are to: offer no direct advice; remember that parents are not objective about their own children; show no indicators of approval or disapproval; and listen without argument or jumping ahead, which creates a sense of un-involvement and distance. Parents perceive these professional behaviors as being polite but uncaring, uninvolved, and even as not listening, thereby, in effect, creating distance between the parent and teacher. The idea of showing no indicators of approval or disapproval in a conversation has the effect of making speakers believe that their words are falling on deaf ears. When the hearer does not respond in a reciprocal manner, either asking for clarification or offering ideas, it allows the speaker to generate a variety of potentially false assumptions regarding the hearer's position. This sense of distancing that is prevalent in D'Evelyn's recommendations remains today.

Delpit (1988), referring to the research done by Erickson (1975), points out that the ways in which participants increase the indirectness of language used with the intent to lessen power differences only serves to lessen the cues that can inform understanding. D'Evelyn's admonition to sit back and listen may be interpreted by parents as indifference or withholding validation of the parent's views. By encouraging parents to offer solutions without actively or jointly constructing them, teachers may go against the parents' perception of who's the expert. Some parents may even view this as another of those known answer triads (IRE) they experienced as a student in school. The parent may think, the teacher already knows the answer and what she wants to do, why ask me? This distancing occurs for parents as communication that is couched in polite and obtuse

terms. Teachers are coached in how to be indirect and inoffensive in their approach to parent communications (Barnes and Todd, 1992).

In a polite society, this indirect and inoffensive approach would appear to be appropriate but has some drawbacks. Consider the following teacher's frustration as he was informed, through an administrator's memo arriving in his teacher mailbox, regarding appropriate communication for the parent-teacher conference (Paulis, 1983).

The following statements introduced a list for the teachers' consideration.

Sometimes we use terms that lack professional wisdom. Be a true professional. The following seem amusing but can be barriers to communication.

Don't Use	Do Use
Somewhat Harsh teacher's words	Euphemisms
Does all right, if pushed.	Accomplishes tasks when interest is frequently stimulated.
Steals.	Needs help in learning to respect the property rights of others.
Is a bully.	Has qualities of leadership but needs help in learning to use them democratically.
Lies.	Shows difficulty in distinguishing between imaginary and factual material.
Disliked by other children.	Needs help in learning to form lasting friendships (p. 53).

Paulis (1983) points out that we can assume these euphemisms represent professional wisdom, which in his mind also is "imprecision, circumlocution, ambiguity, evasiveness, and deception" (p. 54). Through the use of such language a wise professional "skillfully eludes contention, discomfort and the truth" (p. 54). Wertsch

(1991) points out that the mediational means utilized by institutions often provide specific categories or ways of thinking about events and people that are constraining. Paulis obviously considers the language of professional wisdom constraining.

Paulis seems to be struggling to create intimate interactions, that enable both teacher and parents to know and understand what is being said. Yet some people in the education system want to institutionalize and professionalize this communication. We can also see this teacher has a struggle with perspective, in that he perceives only two choices, the wrong way and a right way to communicate. Those who use them do not consciously recognize the power of the mediational means, language-through the teacher's choice of words, in organizing action and the potential results. This seems to tie in well with Delpit's (1988) assertion about the "culture of power" (p. 282).

Delpit has pointed out what she perceives regarding styles of communication in her article *Silenced Dialogue* (1988). The more the representative of the culture of power wants to diminish the power differential between conversants, the more indirect and potentially confusing the speech becomes. This mismatch can be seen in the following quote from a student's perception of trying to talk with an educator.

> It became futile because they (white educators) think they know everything about everybody. What you have to say about your life, your children, doesn't mean anything. They don't really want to hear what you have to say. They wear blinders-earplugs. It just doesn't make sense to keep on talking to them (p. 281).

Just as Delpit asks how such complete communication blocks can exist when both parties truly believe they have the same aims, I ask how can parent-teacher conferences leave parents and teachers feeling so dissatisfied. Examples of this dissatisfaction are reflected in the following comments:

I am a parent and was involved in Head Start because of the parent involvement component written into that program. However, when our son went into kindergarten, our involvement trailed off. I don't know if that was because we were intimidated by the teachers, if we were somehow discouraged from participating, or if we were made not to feel welcome (Hayes, 1987).

This parent expressed confusion over the total experience with school and its communication. We can't judge by this statement what caused this parent's involvement to trail off, yet it is an example of the parent's sense of somehow being dis-invited to participate in the education of their child. As we consider the discourse that occurs between parents and teachers in the annual ritual of parent-teacher conferences, we may be able to shed some light on possible reasons parents may come away from school interactions with this sense of "not feeling welcome."

But, what about the teacher? In Heath's work (1983) we get a picture of how frequently parents and teachers have misunderstandings in regard to expectations of performance at school. Heath's research highlights how long standing barriers and distrust exists between people of communities who use language differently than the school environment uses language. The choice and usage of words grow out of an individual's set of values and perceptions. Since every individual is a part of a variety of groups, all holding ideologies, they select words when they speak that reflect the ideologies of the groups they have positioned themselves in, for the current verbal interaction.

Goodman (1989) asserts that teachers believe they must "educate" parents and find ways to bring them into a world that is an extension of the teachers. It should come as no surprise then that a parent may feel unwelcome in school or walk away with a

perception of "what do I know anyway" (p. 16). Again I refer the reader back to the goals

of the PTA of educating parents. What is needed then is more explicit access to the rules

for the "culture of power." Much like Heath (1983) brings attention to the need for the

rules of school communication to be made explicit and direct so that children can perform

more successfully in the classroom, the rules of communication during the parent-teacher

conference need to be made explicit. Mehan's work (1979) with the Initiation, Response,

Evaluation (IRE) pattern of talk certainly sheds light on one possible explanation for

miscommunication in the parent-teacher conference. One possibility is that a parallel

situation to the classroom miscommunication exists for parents as they come to the

parent-teacher conference. Parents may not pick up on the indirect ways that teachers

approach sensitive issues and concerns. The ways in which parents' use words in the

home and communities may differ markedly from the ways teachers use words in the

parent-teacher conferences. When teachers and parents become more conscious of the

potential presence of a Discourse of power in the conference, then perhaps all participants

may be able to restructure their discourse so a sense of satisfactory communication within

the parent-teacher conference can occur.

Teachers' and Parents' Prior Knowledge of Learning and Teaching

When participants come to the parent-teacher conference, they have expectations,

which involve anticipations and predictions regarding how conversants will act and talk.

These expectations may be based on social norms, communication rules, stereotypes or

impressions of personal characteristics gained prior to the event. Teachers and parents

have a difficult time conversing when expectations and performance of one or both

conversants are mismatched. Participants, who may be relative strangers during

communication, use stereotypes to position each other prior to an interaction (Gudykunst, 1992). Similarly, prior to the conference, parents and teachers often position each other based on stereotypical group qualities of teachers and parents. These expectations and predictions are frequently adjusted multiple times as discourse occurs over the school year and again as it proceeds during the conference. The language of the conference has the potential to support these mental shifts of position.

Frequently the "sameness" of words adds to the confusion in developing a shared view of teaching and learning. For the sake of contextualization, I use the field of literacy as an example. In elementary-school parent-teacher conferences, the participants generally address literacy components but often have a great deal of confusion and conflict over the "right way" to teach literacy skills. The behavioristic and social constructivist views discussed earlier create a very murky picture for some teachers. Imagine the confusion that reigns among the parents of our students as they confer with teachers who hold conflicting perspectives during the same year within the same school building. Many words in literacy education have remained the same (i.e., read to your child could set an expectation for the construction of meaning or give attention to isolated sub-skills) only the meanings and applications have changed. Teachers and parents are unaware that complete understandings are seldom gained through the use of language alone. Today many classroom teachers enrolled in literacy courses are learning about ideas of constructing meaning as they attend workshops to extend their understanding of literacy concepts. For example, the definition of reading may be presented in ways that resemble the report of the commission on reading, *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (1985)

64

Reading is a process of constructing meaning from written texts. It is a complex skill requiring the co-ordination of a number of interrelated sources of information. This view of reading acknowledges the existence of sub-skills such as letter discrimination and the identification of words, however skilled reading takes place only as various sub-skills are put together along with practice and the interpretations by the reader based on the readers' background, purpose and context in which the reading occurs (p. 7).

However, this information about reading being a process of constructing meaning is frequently presented to preservice teachers and practicing teachers in a manner that does not promote their own active construction of meaning. As the language used to explain the reading process changes, classroom teachers may quickly forget the way common words like "read with your child" carry new meanings. The classroom teacher ends up with a new set of meanings for an old vocabulary with little opportunity to acquire an understanding of the new meanings.

Without a clear understanding of the new meanings for the old vocabulary and an awareness of how this change may create confusion for parents, communication of expectations and outcomes may become muddled. In addition to these conflicting messages within teacher-education classes and inservice training, classroom teachers often take a number of content knowledge classes that are thoroughly permeated with the structure, language and practices of the behavioristic perspective (Ball and McDiarmid, 1989) and may be totally unaware that any conflict in understanding when they communicate these changes to parents. In this study, as the discourse unfolded in the parent-teacher conference, I looked for indicators that parents understand the new ideas, which may be attached to previously familiar words. Further consideration will be given to the teacher's explanations and the resulting parental understanding.

Gee (1990) points out that "Our western focus on individualism makes us constantly forget the importance of having been 'properly socialized'" (p. 147). The socialization in the instructional process of education institutions is assumed to be automatic. When students exhibit behaviors that do not match the accepted norm for school the student is identified as deficient. A teacher asks a student to take his seat and the student responds by picking up his chair and asking, "where are we going," serves as an example of assumed socialization. Gee (1990) comments regarding this type of phenomenon

> Many minority and lower socio-economic students have great difficulty accommodating to, or adapting to, certain 'mainstream' Discourses, in particular, many school-based Discourses. These Discourses often conflict seriously (in values, attitudes, ways of acting, thinking, talking) with their own home and community-based Discourses. ...the difficulty of accommodation can certainly give rise to large problems in gaining the social goods that the society ties to mastery of mainstream Discourses (p. 148).

The behaviorist argues that all individuals have equal access to all social goods if they just master the individual sequential elements of a study. The behaviorist has no room for accepting other knowledge that may be acquired both within and outside of school. Classroom teachers have assimilated the behavioristic assumptions regarding school behaviors through their extended apprenticeships of observation (Lorti, 1975). Education is conducted through the use of language in both oral and written forms (Cazden, 1988; Heath,1986). The closer the match between the ways language is used in the home and the way it is used at school creates advantages or disadvantages for the student. The basic atomistic view of language as holding a message that is passed by the sender to a receiver intact has often left room for confusion. Though communication between participants in the educational arena is attempted through both oral and written

means, shared understandings do not necessarily result. Parents and other adult caregivers are often uninformed of the new definitions and approaches that are attached to the old words. Teachers, at best, often have only partial understandings of new concepts. In the parent-teacher conference little is done that supports the parents understanding of a teacher's expectations for instructional support of school learning at home.

Students and parents often believe the way to achieve in school is to remain silent; wait for the knowledge to be dispensed and then respond with a teacher-designated right answer. This perspective opposes the idea of learning and reading being an interactive process of constructing meaning. Many teachers and parents have learned that schools reward labeling and recounting forms for display of information, skills, and sub skills in academic performance. Most parents experienced traditional classrooms in which teachers often demonstrated the use of the known-answer question, which requires description or labeling. The ability to recount or recast past events in answer to questions such as, "What did we talk about the other day?" is praised and valued. In addition, students are expected to know how to follow directions from oral and written sources by themselves and know the language of common courtesy (Cazden, 1988).

Such experiences as students may not have prepared teachers or parents for understanding what is meant by the concepts of constructing meaning or contextualized understandings. The societal constraints of roles and expectations also confuse this idea of jointly constructing meaning or collaboratively developing goals and dreams for the student. Even though both teacher and parent would acknowledge that they have goals or dreams for the student, they do not think about the potential mismatch of these goals and dreams. This led me into the literature regarding how expectations and assumptions

allow the use of certain words and limit the use of others. As Gee (1991) points out, people are guessers and choosers when it comes to assigning meanings to words. People are also guessers and choosers when selecting which words to use that will present and generate acceptance of their ideas to another person based on assumptions, categories and expectations (Gudykunst, 1992).

Within this study as I looked at the parent-teacher conference I tried to determine just how discourse affects the parent-teacher conference. Discourse (the ways individuals use language as reflective of an ideology, social goods, positions within cultures and sub-cultures) does affect the give-and-take in any interaction.

Teachers who use their knowledge about discourses, genres, and ways in which meanings are generated may foster more productive interactions with parents. A teacher using knowledge of referential perspective may be more likely to realize the potential for parents to think and talk about their children in familiar affective ways rather than in the comparative formal school discourses. This realization can help teachers understand why parents may view their child differently than the teacher.

Summary

In this chapter, I have shown how it is possible for well-intentioned people to use the same words and yet have very different personal understandings, which often confuses the outcome expected from the interactions that occur. Within these perspectives, I address expectations of how a teacher is to act when teaching and how a learner is to demonstrate learning. The potential for teachers to be considered the "tellers" of knowledge or the guides while jointly constructing knowledge is present. The further idea that knowledge in itself is not static but dynamic as learners connect new

information to prior experiences, thereby constructing their understanding of the information, is also a part of the participants' differing perspectives.

The history of parent-teacher communication structures has been explored in relationship to two cognitive theories. Emerging models for teaching, learning, and communication provides ample evidence of the potential for miscommunication. Every time individuals come together to communicate information and ideas, these basic perspectives, behavioristic and social constructivist, among other issues, are involved. To know what writing, reading, speaking, and listening involve draws upon our basic understandings of learning and teaching. Given what we know about language, meaning and action when teachers, parents and students come together in the parent-teacher conference misunderstandings are immanent. In this study, I look at the parent-teacher discourse trying to determine just what part it has in the understandings that occur.

Research shows that the beliefs, expectations and assumptions that individuals carry affect their choice of language and the ways they use words to create interactions and affect outcomes. Knowing that the discourse of individuals as they interact can offer a window into the beliefs, expectations and assumptions of participants I designed this study to look at the effects of discourse within the parent-teacher conference.

Using these theoretical constructs, I conducted this study. The following chapters present what occurred. In Chapter 3, I cover the context for the conferences by presenting the population that was selected for this study. In Chapter 4, I explain the methods I used in my study of discourse in the parent-teacher conference. Ethnography and discourse-analysis were two effective tools I used in my investigation. I collected data by creating field notes during the conferences along with audio and videotapes of the parent-teacher

conferences. I conducted personal interviews with the teachers, parents, and students before and after the conferences.

In Chapter 5, I use these theoretical constructs to create multiple lenses for analyzing the conferences. I use the idea of a lens to talk about these theoretical constructs since the metaphor offers the idea of perspectives. A lens creates a sharp picture only if suited to the vision that is needed. By using multiple lenses, I can offer multiple perspectives of what discourse accomplishes in the parent-teacher conference. These lenses formed as contrasting perspectives. If we think of our two perspectives, behaviorism, and constructivism, we can think of ways in which discourse may present itself within each. In this chapter I present a continuum of concepts. By applying a lens to identify discourse as authoritative (words that have no room for play) to generative words (those that plea for alternatives) and academic space (the dichotomous language of school) to the familiar (which embraces a more affective tone), we readily look for the effects of discourse on parent-teacher conferences. Further analysis shows the use of elements from discourse analysis that includes: (a) silence, (b) talk types, (c) questions, and (d) politeness codes. Beyond the theoretical constructs forming lenses for looking at the discourse of these parent-teacher conference are the perspectives of the participants. I designed this study so that the participants could offer their interpretations of the events as they viewed their parent-teacher conferences on videotape.

The main focus in Chapter 5 is what effects different kinds of discourse have on the parent-teacher conference. Can I see any of my hypothetical exhibits of social constructivism in practice? If social constructivism is in practice what are the effects on the conference participants? Can any intersubjectivity be identified? Is it possible to

determine if the discourse of the parent-teacher conference presents markers for the ZPD

of the participants? Chapter 6 provides the findings and implications of this study. With

these questions in mind, I move now to the methodology of my study.

CHAPTER 3

How Does Discourse Influence the Parent-Teacher Conference?

The purpose of this study is to consider what influence discourse has upon the parent-teacher conference.

Questions that arise out of this central question may be:

1. What does the discourse of a parent-teacher conference look like?

2. What are the effects of the teacher's language choices on the parent-teacher conference?

3. What are the effects of the parent's language choices on the parent-teacher conference?

4. Is there a Discourse of education at work in the parent-teacher conference?

I used qualitative research methods to look carefully at the words of the parent-teacher conference. I observed parent-teacher conferences, interviewed teachers, parents, and students both before and after the parent-teacher conferences, conducted a stimulated recall through video viewing, and collected communication artifacts to help me answer my research questions. In the following chapter I will describe the setting, participants, and methodology used to gather and analyze my data. I begin with the selection process and a description of the school districts in which I gathered my data. In the second section of this chapter, I describe the teachers and the physical setting for the parent-teacher conferences. In the final section I describe the selection and characteristics of the families that participated in the parent-teacher conferences that I observed.

As I considered the parent-teacher conference, I tried to determine how to understand what parents and teachers were talking about when they determined that a conference "went well" or that "it didn't accomplish much." Often as I talked with parents and

teachers informally they were unable to identify what occurred in the conference that gave them the "sense" that the conference would bring beneficial results, or that nothing would happen following the conference as a result of what occurred in the conference.

I determined that the way to find out what was affecting the parent-teacher conference was to attend a number of them and see if the participants could identify similar experiences or events across conferences that created positive results for parents and teachers. Further, I wanted to know what event or interaction occurred within the conferences that created the "sense" that nothing would happen as a result of the conferences. What factors were influencing the "success" of the parent-teacher conference? I had read how-to articles regarding the preparing, conducting and recording the conference. I found valuable information but little insight into why the participants may continue to experience a level of dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the parent-teacher conference.

I decided to look closely at the discourse of the parent-teacher conference. What factors for success continued to elude teachers and parents? What methodologies would help me gain access to the discourse in the parent teacher conference? I selected a qualitative approach to researching this question. Using Barnes and Todd's (1995) insights regarding the constraints of implicit roles of teachers and students for interactions in school made me wonder more about what impact the discourse has in the parent-teacher conference. What implicit roles might constrain this interaction? I used observation in the field, along with the field notes, interviews, and stimulated recall video -viewing as the primary sources for information in this study.

Methodology

I constructed this study with the intent to triangulate my information by using three types of data. I derived primary data from the video taping of the parent-teacher conferences. By analyzing the discourse as shown on the video tape, I, as a researcher, was able to develop some insights about what appeared to be occurring during the parent-teacher conference. With the use of my observation notes during the actual conference I was able to generate a fairly complete picture of the conferences. The one exception for observation notes occurred in Ms. Katti's classrooom. The conference tapes were generated by a support person since Ms. Katti and Ms. Smith's conferences occurred concurrently. The second part of my data analysis utilized interviews with the participants of the parent-teacher conference. During these interviews I asked questions that generated perspectives and information from the participant's anticipations and reflections of the conference. The third type of data analysis involved the stimulated recall viewing of the conference tapes. The second and third types of data helped to establish the perspective of the participants as they also considered the parent-teacher conference. I transcribed all of the audio and video voice tapes.

Interview Strategies

To understand the expectations and assumptions that both the parents and teachers had going into these particular parent-teacher conferences, I used a structured interview form to gather consistent information. My goal in using these prompts was to get the participants' view of the expectations, goals, purposes and preparation for the conferences. I designed the preconference interview form (Appendix A) to facilitate my understanding of the participants' understandings prior to the conference.

I asked the participants to describe their prior experiences with parent-teacher conferences. I believed this would help me understand what the participants would be expecting as they entered this conference. I used open-ended response questions as well as questions that required the respondent to select a specific word to describe their feelings. For example, in one closed question I asked the parent and teacher to circle a single word to describe the value of these conferences. In question Number 1, I provided a selection of four words; useless, helpful, valuable, and crucial. I used a prompt that asked parents and teachers to describe their hope for the current conference as well as what they believed would happen if they did not attend the conference. I followed these two questions with a more direct question about their perception of the school's purpose for the conference. I specifically designed two open-ended questions (6 & 10) to give parents and teachers the opportunity to address any other concerns regarding the conference that were not apparent in the earlier questions.

I conducted postconference interviews with parents consisting of loosely structured prompts (Appendix B) prior to the video viewing. I designed the interview questions to call upon the participants' memories about what occurred without the support of audio or video information. The purpose of the design was to ascertain participant's satisfaction, knowledge gained, and possible further responsibilities. Again, I used open-ended questions. For several of the questions, I used a response continuum with values from 0 to 5; with 0 meaning, "no benefit was derived/the experience only proved upsetting," and 5 meaning that the participants "couldn't possibly miss the conference opportunity." An opportunity for further comments provided additional information about the participant's view of the conference.

Observation Notes and Taped Data

Because qualitative methods allow for rich description of interactions, I decided to observe the parent-teacher conferences. I set up my video camera in an inconspicuous place with a view of all the participants. I also used an audio tape recorder to supplement any sound that may not be audible from the video recorder. One somewhat intrusive element was the need for a particular placement of each person. This discourse analysis helped me identify the words and their potential meanings.

Qualitative research allows the observer to enter into the world of those being observed. A rich description of all interactions helped me answer a variety of "why" questions as well as provide potential insights into the actions of the participants. This qualitative view of parent-teacher conferences provides several perspectives regarding the meaning of both words and actions occurring daily. Ethnography provides the opportunity to investigate social processes in everyday settings rather than in artificial forms set up for the purposes of research. This lessens the danger that the findings will apply only to the research situation. (Hammersly and Atkinson, 1992).

Further, knowing that human actions never occur in isolation, but are created through, as well as create, social meaning, intention, motives, attitudes and beliefs, this study brings careful consideration and insight to language use in the parent-teacher conference.

Discourse Analysis

Researchers have found discourse analysis to be a valuable method in analyzing talk within the school in relationship to the parent/child interaction and teacher/learner interactions (Cazden, 1988; Michaels, 1986; Heath, 1989). Since we know that "any

social institution can be considered a communication system" (Cazden 1988, p. 2) and

that oral language is the main tool of this communication system, discourse analysis of

communication patterns within these parent-teacher conferences was appropriate. The

"language of curriculum, the language of control, and the language of personal identity"

(Cazden 1988, p. 3) are in operation as a part of the social institution of school. Through

the use of discourse analysis, researchers have identified the following language

functions: "the communication of propositional information, the establishment and

maintenance of social relationships as well as the expression of the speaker's identity"

(Cazden 1988, p. 3). I cover each of the aforementioned languages and their functions in

this study.

Is there a language of curriculum, control and personal identity when parents and

teachers come together? Does language function in the communication of propositional

information in establishing and maintaining social relationships and in expressing a

speaker's identity during the parent-teacher conference? Again, the all-encompassing

question for this study is: What impact does the discourse have in a parent-teacher

conference?

Defining Discourse Within This Study

In the introduction of this study, I set forth the historical concept of discourse and

where I stand in relationship to its multiple uses. Again, to refresh our memory, I

highlight the five elements of a discourse "identity kit" that Gee presents:

1. Discourses are inherently "ideological." They crucially involve a set of values and viewpoints in terms of what one must speak and act, at least while being in the discourse; otherwise one doesn't count as being in it.

2. Discourses are resistant to internal criticism and self-scrutiny since uttering viewpoints that seriously undermine them defines one as being outside them.

3. Discourse-defined positions from which to speak and behave are not however, just defined internal to a discourse, but also as standpoints taken up by the discourse in relation to other ultimately opposing, discourses.

4. Any discourse concerns itself with certain objects and puts forward certain concepts, viewpoints, and values at the expense of others. In doing so it will marginalize viewpoints and values central to other discourses.

5. Discourses are intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society. Control over certain discourses can lead to the acquisition of social goods (money, power, status) in a society (Gee, p. 4-5 in Mitchell and Weiler, 1991).

Within this study then, as I look at the parent teacher-conference, I am trying to determine just how discourse affects the parent-teacher conference. Believing that discourse (the way individuals use language as reflective of an ideology, social goods, positions within cultures and sub-cultures) does affect the give and take in any interaction, are these effects evident in these parent-teacher interactions?

Discourse analysis then allows the outsider, the researcher, to look carefully at conversation, consider the context in which it is spoken, as well as the actual words (linguistic strategies) of the speaker, as they may or may not create "interpersonal involvement" (Tannen, 1991) for the participants.

In this study, observation, interviews with participants, and discourse analysis allowed me to develop a "sense" (Wertsch, 1991) of the words that were occurring in the parent-teacher conference. The participants' perspectives, as they viewed the videotaped conference, provided valuable information.

Re-Creating the History for the Conference

During the postconference interviews with the participants, I also explored the contextual background for parent-teacher interactions across the year between the teacher and parents. As we talked, parents, teachers and students described what interactions had taken place over the year that created the context for the spring parent-teacher conference. I used this to think about a sense of history that had developed between the families and the teacher that might have impacted the actual conference discourse.

Stimulated-Recall Interview

One of the strategies for gaining understanding of the discourse in these parent-teacher conferences was stimulated recall by viewing videotape of parent, student and teacher. This procedure, adapted from Morine and Vallance (1975) and Bromme (1987) studies, led to joint viewing (parent[s], student, and I) of the tape of their respective conferences. Each teacher and I viewed the tape of the conferences jointly as well. I prompted teacher, parent, and student response by the following statements.

> I am interested in gaining further understanding of what you were thinking, as you were involved in this conference. As we watch the video tape please tell me to stop the tape whenever you would like to explain what you were thinking, or if you were consciously thinking about adjusting your approach due to something within the conference. You may also ask me to stop the tape if you are surprised by what is being said in relationship to what you remember occurring. I may stop the tape myself at a couple of points, but you may feel free to stop me and give me specific information about an event at any time.

As the tape played, I encouraged participants to identify any particular moments that prompted them to adjust their thinking, draw conclusions, or change their line of conversation during the conference. I wanted to know what parts (specific words or

actions) gave them particular insight into what was being communicated or felt during the conference?

Site Information

Selection of the School Districts

I conducted the study using two school districts in the Midwest. These school districts serve populations of suburban and urban fringe communities as determined by the most recent population census. I approached five school districts for permission to conduct this study. Each school district distributed my information to their teaching staff. The two cooperating districts were the only districts that provided positive responses from teachers who were willing to have their parent-teacher conferences videotaped and participate in the interview schedule.

Selection of the Families

The parents within the classrooms of cooperating teachers were selected according to teacher choice and consent of each family. The teachers each said they believed they had parents that would be interested in being a part of the study. Subsequently, I sent letters of inquiry to each family the teachers identified. In order to facilitate discussion of each of the conferences and the information gained in the following discussion, I present each district and the corresponding classrooms separately.

Study Design and Population Involved

I chose spring conferences since I assumed the parents and teachers would have a rapport in place after a six-month interaction period. I also assumed that these parents would have a history of communication by this point in the school year. I approached

several school districts and solicited cooperation from teachers and parents of first, third and fifth grade students.

The selection of these grade levels involved my perception that parents and teachers view these grades as pivotal points in elementary education for children experiencing changes. I believe that children in the first grade experience some of their first really focused academic experiences, beginning reading and introduction to actual academic instruction. Third grade usually involves a change in the focus of instruction from learning to read to reading to learn through more independent learning from content texts. Fifth grade becomes the pivotal point in making a transition to multiple teachers in middle school arena. At each new level of independence, students may experience or anticipate new concerns; both parents and students may be concerned about the level of skills and maturity required to insure success.

The first, third, and fourth grade teachers that responded indicated that they volunteered because of their interest in reflecting on their current communication practice. Teachers who are already interested in their communication and interrelations with the home have proven to be excellent partners in this investigation.

In this study I did not intend to focus on specific social, economic, or cultural issues in schools. Participants included a single Caucasian father, a single African-American mother and two blended Caucasian families, and three traditional families. The families that decided to participate in this study were from a wide range of social and economic categories. I had expected that some parents from what is traditionally considered more disadvantaged groups would be less likely to participate. However, this was not the case. The participants came from diverse backgrounds.

I had hoped to enlist parents that had multiple children in these grades so personality variables would be lessened. Having parents with children in more than one of these grades would allow me to consider the dynamics of the same parent involvement with multiple teachers concurrently, but I was unable to generate the multiple-child situation.

I used videotapes from two conferences in a first grade classroom, three conferences in a three/four combination grade classroom, and two conferences in a self-contained third grade classroom. This created a data bank of seven conferences. I had no volunteers at the fifth grade level from any school district. The following table gives an overview of the participants in this study.

Table 2 Study Participants

Frontier District			Sunset District	
Evans Elementary Building			Sharon Elementary Building	
T = First grade-Ms. Smith			T = Third grade-Ms. Cooper	
P = Mrs. Mac S = Mac	P = Mrs. Shelly S = Shelly		P = Mrs. Al	P = Mrs. Heidi
T = Third/fourth grade - Ms. Katti				
P = Mr. Rhonda S = Rhonda	P = M/M Steve S = Steve	P = M/M Amber S = Amber	T = Teacher P = Parent S = Student	

Schedule for Entrance Into the Study Site for Data Gathering

Prior to regularly scheduled spring parent-teacher conferences (March, 1995) I made the initial contact with the school administrators/directors. I sent a letter of introduction and a brief abstract of the study (Appendix C) to the administrators of several districts and, with their permission, to teachers expressing an interest in the project. When teachers indicated an interest in this study I met with them and set up a schedule for data gathering.

Prior to scheduled parent-teacher conferences the teachers selected several potential participating families from their classroom and contacted the parents to determine their interest and secure their consent. Time constraints were an issue in the decison to request the teachers to select families that might be interested in participating in this study. Rather than send requests to every parent in a classroom, I thought that the teachers would know which of their parents who attended conferences would be most likely to consent to a third party being involved in the conference time. I also believed the teachers would have the best idea of which parents would attend the parent-teacher conference. The teachers did send home more permission requests than I was able to use because we anticipated some negative responses. I contacted the parents who responded affirmatively. Those parents who chose not to participate indicated a lack of time for the interviews as the reason for being unable to participate. I met the parents who expressed an interest in the study to answer any questions and allay any fears prior to the conference. I had all the consent forms from parents, students and teachers before I began data collection during the regularly scheduled spring parent-teacher conference times (Appendix D).

Prior to the conference, I gave the preconference interview forms (Appendix A) to the teachers to distribute to the participating families. However, not all parents received the preconference interview forms and, while others did receive them, they did not understand that they were to be completed prior to the conference time. I met with the parents prior to the conference and received any information from the preconference interview forms at that time. For those that had not received the interview forms, we talked our way through the information during an interview time.

At the time of the conference, I had an exit interview (Appendix E) available for the conference participants. This parents' exit interview was either in writing or oral form. Some parents were uncertain about completing the exit interview form by themselves. I am unclear as to why they were reluctant, but some waited and shared their responses orally during the postconference interview.

After the conference I scheduled a time and place that would be convenient for the participants to view the video of the conference and talk through their responses to the conference. I audio taped these interview sessions for later analysis.

Within district number one (hereafter referred to as Frontier District) I used videotaped parent-teacher conferences from two classrooms. I was present and video taped the conferences in a first grade self-contained classroom; the teacher in the third/fourth grade combination room was already planning to video tape her conferences and since they occurred simultaneously with the first grade conferences; I used her tapes. According to teachers, the building that I worked in serves a low to low-middle socio-economic group. The community directly around the building is comprised of small frame homes and government-subsidized apartment buildings.

School districts across the country have varying policies regarding how inclusive parent-teacher conferences are, the frequency of the conferences, the time frame for conducting the conferences, as well as arranging the conferences. The Frontier District has as a policy to conduct parent-teacher conferences each fall and spring for all parents within the system. The conferences are scheduled during afternoons and evening times identified within the school calendar at the beginning of the year. The district notifies parents using district-wide memos and the teachers develop a schedule for individual conference times. Some teachers prefer to have just parents at the actual conference, other teachers allow the student, and sometimes siblings, to attend. At one school the focal student was present and actively engaged in leading the conference time.

Frontier School District

I videotaped two parent-teacher conferences in a first grade room in the Frontier District. These conferences involved the parent, the child and the teacher. This triad was seated at a round child-sized table at the front of the room. The following diagram shows how the physical arrangement of the room appeared on the night of the conference.

Figure 3 Ms. Smith's Classroom
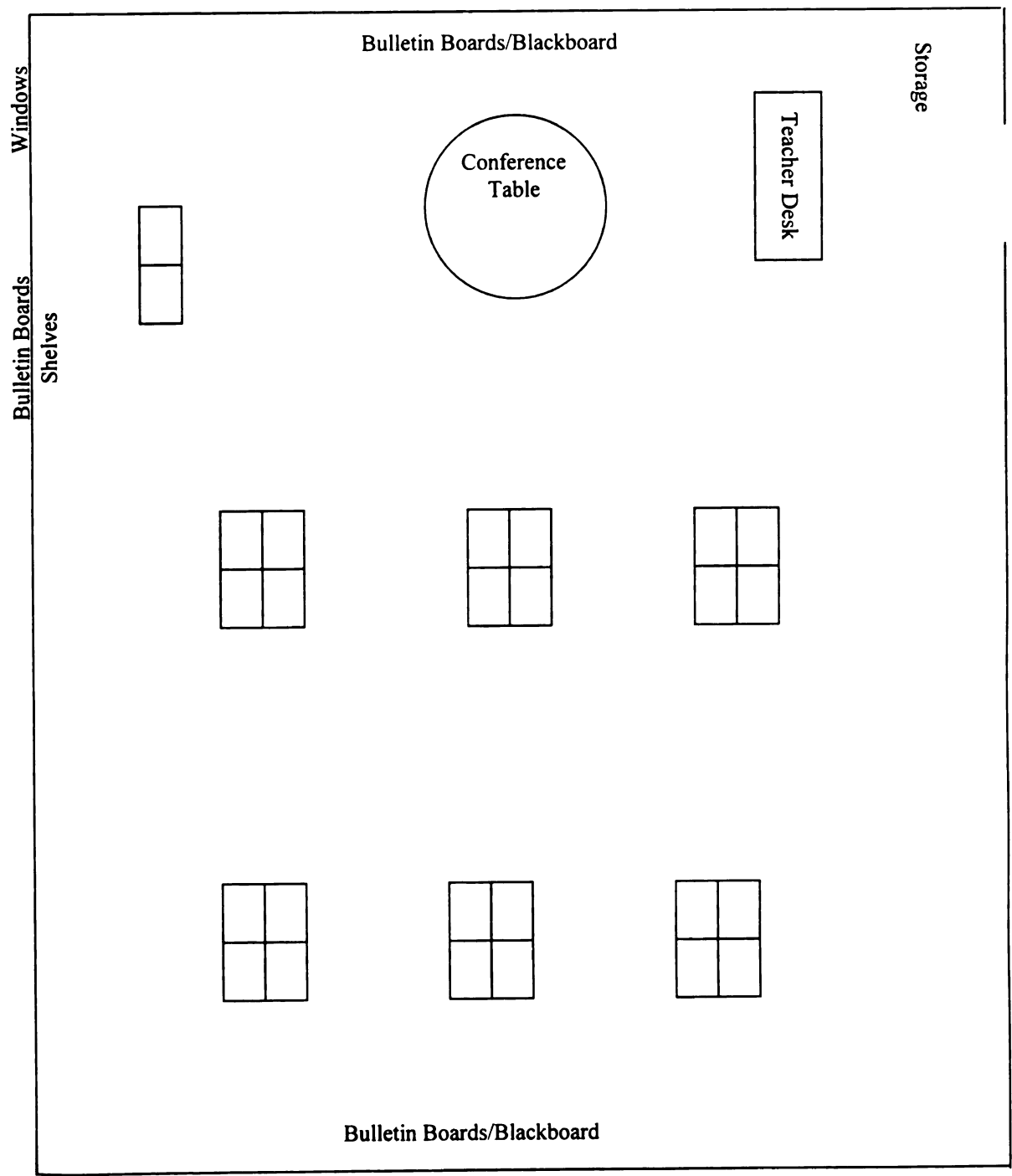
First-Grade Classroom: Ms. Smith

I refer to the first grade self-contained classroom as Ms. Smith's room in the narrative to follow. Ms. Smith is a middle-aged female and has been teaching for twenty plus years. She has no children but is married.

Each of Ms. Smith's conferences includes another participant, Ms. Kay, an intern teacher from a nearby university. Ms. Kay has been with these students for the year and was included in the conferences I observed. In fact Ms. Smith indicated that Ms. Kay had developed the conference material for Mac's conference time.

Mac's conference. The first conference I observed was with Mac, an African-American male child; the younger of the two boys living with their divorced mother. The mom (Mrs. Mac) is employed full-time as an administrative clerical worker for a nearby city.

Shelly's conference. The second conference was with Ms. Kay, Ms. Smith, Shelly and her mom (Mrs. Shelly). Shelly is the youngest child in a blended family setting. She lives with her mom, dad and an older cousin. Step-siblings are grown and not a part of the nuclear family structure. Her dad has recently been laid off and her mom works outside the home.

Third/Fourth Multi-Age Classroom: Ms. Katti

These conferences were video taped by a helper of Ms. Katti's (the teacher). The area viewed is only one end of a double classroom. The room was arranged as shown by the following diagram.

Figure 4 Ms. Katti's Classroom

Bulletin Boards/Blackboard

Coat Area

Bulletin Boards
Shelves

Coat

Bench for Sharing Area

Open to Shared Classroom

Computer

Bulletin Boards
Shelves

Bulletin Boards/Blackboard
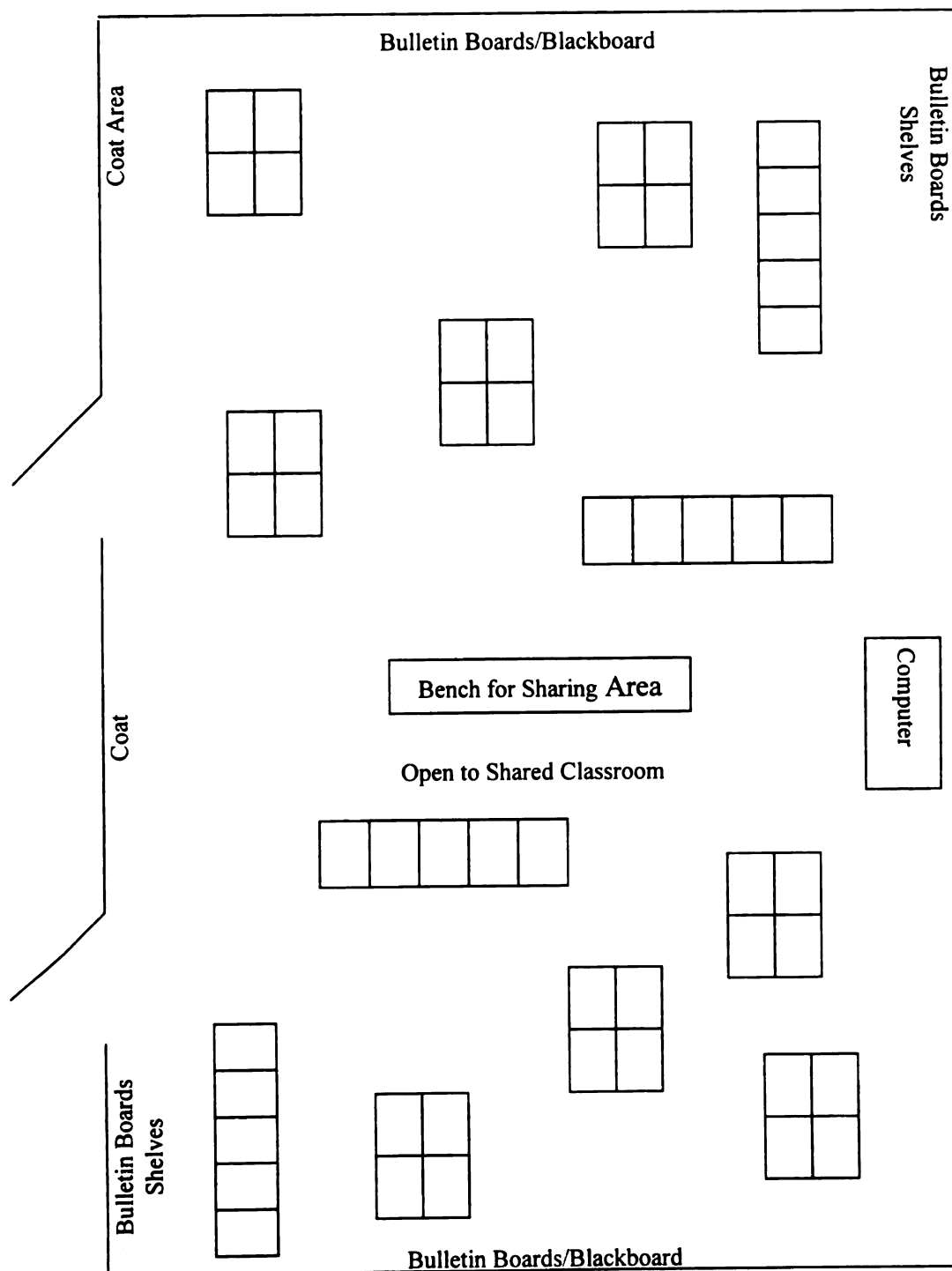
Ms. Katti not only expects students to be at the spring parent-teacher conference, she designs time for the students to plan how they will lead the conference. The conference is the students' opportunity to strut their stuff (Ms. Katti, interview). She has been actively thinking about her conference structure and has videotaped the conferences in the past, to facilitate her own reflections on what can make conferences more meaningful. I was not an observer within Ms. Katti's room during the conference time so I have no field notes. However, all other elements of the study are available for analysis. I have used the videotape as documentation of the actual conference language. The length of each conference varied and in two of the conferences the children shared further information at the computer center via an electronic portfolio that the students had developed. My data included the discourse that occurred within Ms. Katti's room, along with the interviews and video viewing. The teacher, Ms. Katti, is a young mother with school-age children. She has been teaching ten years. Many of those years have been at the current school.

My analysis of three conferences from Ms. Katti's classroom included three families; Rhonda's, Amber's and Steve's parent or parents were present at each conference. This is the second year Ms. Katti, who was present at each conference, has had each of these children in this multi-age classroom.

Rhonda's conference. Rhonda, a third grader, and her father came to the conference. She is the younger of two daughters being raised by their widowed father. Rhonda and her father sat side by side at a set of desks arranged to form a long table. Ms. Katti sat across from the two, but more to the side of the father and diagonal from

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Rhonda. Rhonda used her journal notebook to support her explanation of what she had accomplished.

Amber's conference. Amber, a third grader, also has an older sister. However, Amber had both parents (Mr. and Mrs. Amber) attending her conference. They were seated side by side at a square grouping of four desks. Ms. Katti sat across from the father. Amber stood at the end of the grouping as she gave her explanation. She also used journal entries as exhibits to help in her explanation of her progress.

Steve's conference. Both of Steve's parents attended the conference. Steve, a fourth grader, is the older brother of two children. Steve's parents sat side by side next to Steve forming a line on one side of a linear grouping of desks. Ms. Katti sat across from the parents (Mr. and Mrs. Steve) and Steve. Steve did not readily use paper exhibits of his work to support the conversation during the conference.

Sunset School District

In the second district (hereafter referred to as the Sunset District) I video taped parent-teacher conferences in one classroom, a self-contained third grade. This building serves families of middle to upper middle socio-economic class. The teacher reported that she believes the majority of the parents are professional people. The families in the immediate area surrounding this school building have medium-income, frame and brick homes.

Conferencing with parents during the spring for the Sunset District was by invitation of the teacher or by parent initiation. Not all parents were contacted nor expected to attend the spring parent-teacher conference. In fact, Ms. Cooper reported that any general invitation to parents to come to the school is a relatively new event. About

18 years ago teachers requested that the school district begin an informal parents' night for the fall at each school. Teachers said a get-acquainted time would be beneficial for the year ahead. Now the school district supports spring conference times and the office personnel try to schedule conferences for entire families, so that those with multiple children may have blocks of time at the school rather than multiple days or conflicting appointments from teacher to teacher. However, this spring conference is not a general conference. The school contacted parents and invited them to the spring conference generally on the basis of special needs for their children, anticipating what summer may hold in relationship to ongoing education or other concerns. Parents of children who are doing well in school were not invited to conference with the teacher. All parents may still request a conference, but generally only the parents of children designated by the teachers participate in the spring conference. The length of time allowed for each conference was generally about twenty minutes, however, each of the observed conferences went longer.

In the Sunset District the conferences I observed took place in a self-contained third-grade classroom. This classroom is in a portable unit located in the parking lot outside the main building. The school was using several portable units due to the overcrowding at the elementary level at the time of this study.

Figure 5 Ms. Cooper's Classroom

| Windows/heaters | Bulletin Board | Coat Area and exit to parking lot |

Bookshelves

Sink

Teacher Desk

Parent-Teacher Conference Area

Restrooms

Bookshelves

Storage

Audio-visual Items

Classroom Entrance

Bulletin Boards/Blackboard
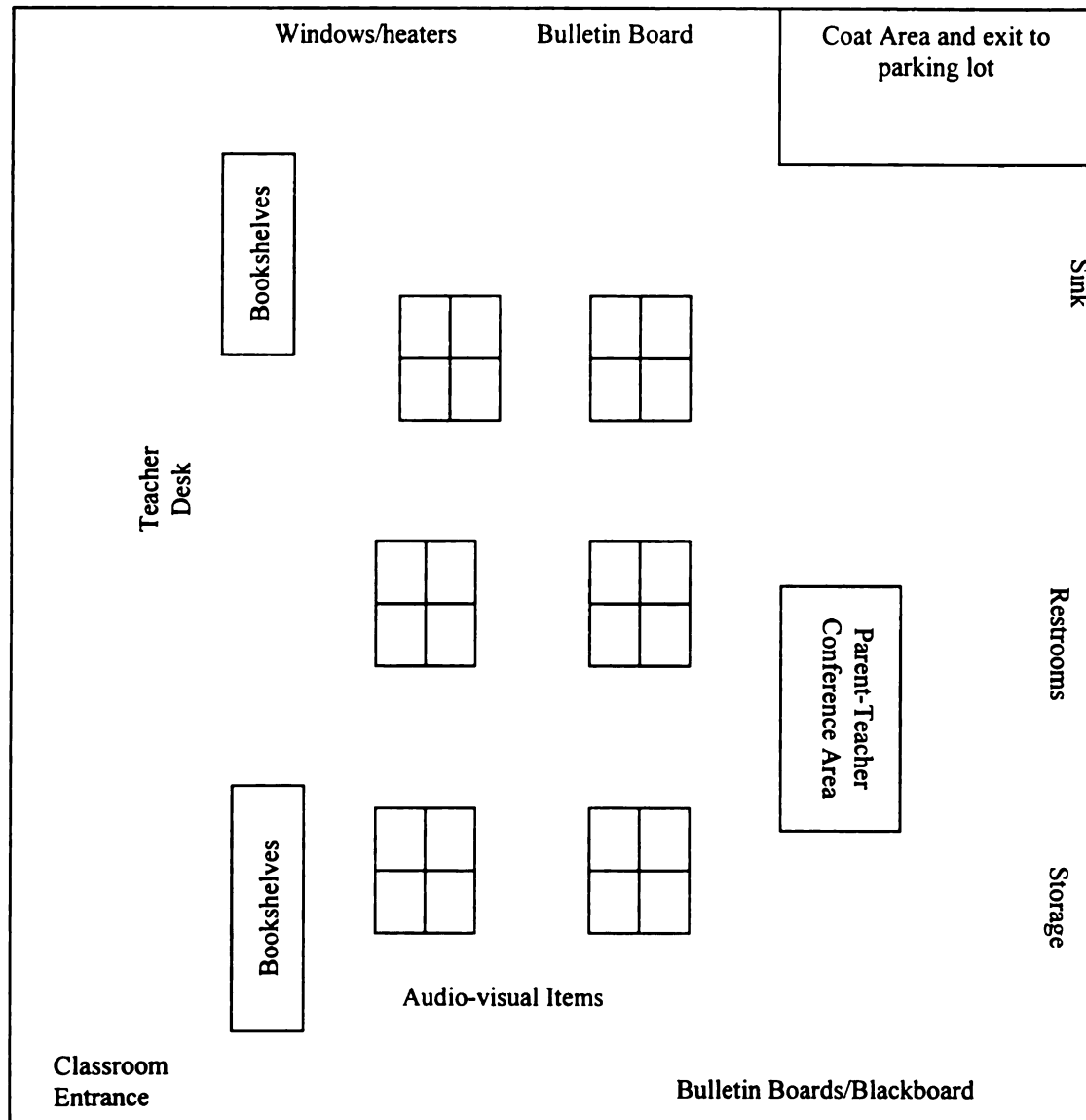
Third-Grade Classroom: Ms. Cooper

The conferences, observed in Ms. Cooper's classroom, occurred in the afternoon. Ms. Cooper volunteered to have her conferences video taped and participated in the interviews even though she had just returned from a five-week leave of absence for family-related needs. Her interest in looking at what was occurring during her parent-teacher conferences prompted her to put forth the additional effort.

Ms. Cooper, a middle-aged woman, has raised a family and lived in the community for a number of years. In fact Mrs. Al (Al's mother) reported that her father, who was the school board president at one time, had known Ms. Cooper for a long time. Mrs. Al said that Ms. Cooper's presence in the community has created a sense of continuity.

Ms. Cooper stated that she believed that while the parents were willing to participate in this study, the conferences were more "staged" than if I had not been present. The potential is always present that any change in the routine and environment of a research area will change the behaviors and responses of the participants. I address this concern more in Chapter 5.

Ms. Cooper conducted the conferences at the back of the classroom. She (Ms. Cooper) used an adult-sized table arranged with her materials, folders, and so on. The teacher sat next to the parent on the same side of the table. The teacher indicated the chair to her right, since she is right handed, would be the "parent chair." The seating arrangement is given in Figure 9.

Heidi's conference. Heidi, a third grader in Ms. Cooper's room, is a middle child in a family of four. She has just completed the review process by the special education committee of the school. The Individual Educational Program (IEP) and report from that meeting are a part of this conference. Heidi's mother (Mrs. Heidi) is at this conference along with Ms. Cooper. Heidi's family includes a step-father and three siblings.

Al's conference. The second conference I observed was with Ms. Cooper and Mrs. Al (Al's mother). Al is also a third grader in Ms. Cooper's class. Ms. Cooper and another teacher in the building share the teaching responsibilities for this third grade. The

students move to the team teacher's class for math instruction. Ms. Cooper had tutored Al the summer before third grade began. Al is an adopted younger brother with an older sister.

Explanation of Data Analysis

I transcribed all of the audio and video voice tapes and began to compare, contrast, and combine the words the participants used. Using the transcriptions from the three types of data, I looked for overlapping speech patterns that generally demonstrate connections between individuals engaged in conversation with the intent of considering the level of engagement in the discourse that occurred during the conference. I tried to consider comparable interactions such as client and service provider that may have patterns of interaction such as these parent-teacher conferences. I divided the discourse into time categories and identified the person who seemed to hold the role for primary speaker.

I continued my analysis of this data by asking myself several questions. Going back to the preconference interview forms, I tried to find a cohesive focus for the conference as stated by the teacher and parents. In order to do this I organized their responses to my questions into a table that would help identify common comments or threads of thoughts across their responses prior to the conference. I then looked at the conference itself and tried to find examples of these same thoughts and purposes in application during the conference. Then in the video viewing interviews, I analyzed the participants' words used to discuss the actions of the conference; once again trying to locate a continuance of the purposes and anticipations as expressed earlier.

The next pass through my data challenged me to look at the type of words the teachers and parents used in expressing their expectations for the conference, interacting during the conference and commenting after the conference. Some of the categories, which I identified in previous research, were at the forefront of my awareness, such as: use of education jargon or familiar words, assigning blame or ownership of performance areas, and power words that explicitly assigned authority were not obvious in the discourse of these parent-teacher conferences. I determined that the students did not give enough responses to establish a word type. However, the parents and teachers did use a number of words that, after several tries with multiple categories, best fit a frame of relational or reporting; generative or authoritative categories. Surprisingly, issues of society's expectations for politeness also came into the analysis as I considered the discourse that was present in these parent-teacher conferences. The ways participants used pronouns surprised me as I worked through the data.

As I reflected on the literature reviewed earlier in this study regarding the functions of language, I decided to look for words that position the participants as receivers of information or distributors of information. I further looked for language that positioned the participants through a power differential, i.e., by assigning tasks or responsibility for performance to individuals.

Another question that arose from the literature review involved the statement that parent-teacher interactions were ritualized. I wondered if I would find a ritual in the conferences I would observe. Would the ritual be reflective of other educational discourse like the initiation, response, and evaluation (IRE) structures of classroom interaction (Mehan, 1979)? Even if a ritual existed, would the parent-teacher conference

serve individual participants' expressed goals? Would the referential perspective of each participant be observable during the conference? By using all the data and various foci of analysis I have gained a more enlightened understanding of the impact of discourse during the parent-teacher conference

During the interviews teachers and parents supplied information that helped to build an understanding of the context of the discourse over the year with the focal teacher as well as a history of interactions between the parents and teachers during other years. Through the use of audio tapes, video tapes and observation notes, I was able to carefully attend to the exact words of the participants during the conference and compare participants' expectations of and reflections on the parent-teacher conference.

One example of this careful comparison was in relationship to the teachers' stated purpose for the conference, i.e., to "set goals with parents and get home information about the child" (interview, Ms. Smith). I then looked specifically for examples in the conference at which Ms. Smith invited the parents to set goals *with* her for the remainder of the year. In the case of Ms. Cooper, one of her stated purposes was to build "an understanding of the child from more than one point of view" (preconference interview). So I searched in her conference tapes for language that would invite the creation of this understanding. I looked for language that was more relational and generative that would invite the parent's sharing of a different view of the child (Table 4). I also looked in the transcripts of the teachers' comments during the video viewing and exit interview to determine if the teacher responses were in alignment with the originally stated purposes. Did the teachers, as a result of the conference, accomplish their stated purposes?

The parents also stated their understanding of the purposes of the parent-teacher conference. I looked for language that would support the accomplishment of these purposes in the conference setting. I looked at the statements made during the conference, after the conference in the exit interview and during the video viewing.

When the Questions Began

As I stated earlier, my focus question for this study explores the impact that discourse has on the parent-teacher conference. I have already admitted that I have over the years had questions about the sense of satisfaction that participants are left with after the interactions at the parent-teacher conference. I began to analyze the data by looking for specific topics that would be prevalent in each conference. These recurring words are addressed in Table 7 that presents the expectations and purpose that the participants had for the conference. Then I began to think about the commonalties of the conferences in relationship to topics actually addressed. This information is presented as a time line in the interaction phases of the conference (Figure 13).

Though common topics were evident, they were not complete explanations for the "sense" of satisfaction or dissatisfaction that the parents and teachers expressed. As I continued to analyze the data, I used the preconference questions and interview to highlight some of the areas I suspected would be topics of concern for the participants. I expected that I would find questions arising about what performance levels demonstrate that the student is "a good reader." I expected that parents would be asking about social interactions within the classroom and if the student was being responsible, courteous, and respectful. With the literature review in mind, I expected that some of the parents would want to know about the shifts in reading, writing and spelling instruction. Anticipating

that I would have my predetermined areas of concern addressed in the interviews I was

able to observe and take field notes during the conference time and record new questions

and wonderings. This type of observation is an ongoing analysis of the events as they

occur. I found that in my field notes I pose questions regarding particular points in the

interaction that I would have expected the parent or teacher to respond differently from

what occurred. I also asked myself questions such as: Is the parent making sense of the

explanation? Does the answer the teacher is giving answer the question the parent asked?

I also used my preconference interview questions to focus my attention as I went through

the process of questioning and discovering the patterns while viewing the videotapes of

the conferences. I soon found that new questions and patterns began to emerge from the

data. An example of this emergent quality of my study occurred as I reflected on what

was said by each of the participants and the impact of those words.

My first few passes through the data focused on what was being said. Then as I

was reflecting on the statements, I was struck with the effect that silence had in the

conference. I revisited the conference tapes and thought about who was doing the talking.

How did the time get passed from participant to participant? Then questions about roles

and societal politeness came to mind. As I listened to the comments that one teacher

made as she viewed the video of her conference, she stated that she couldn't believe that

she had missed the parent's effort to ask a question. She said she was so busy moving

through her agenda and missed the parent's efforts to interject a comment (Ms. Smith,

video viewing). One of the parents made an interesting observation as she gave a general

impression she had from the conference, she referred to her sense of surprise at how well

98

her daughter was performing and all of the things she could do (Mrs. Shelly, postconference interview).

The postconference interviews were interesting in that nearly all of the participants indicated that few, if any, surprises occurred. They exchanged no new information and did not share a generally clear sense about the next steps for the student and parents. Neither parents nor teachers could give specific expectations or next steps that the other had identified. Yet, when I went back through the videotapes the teacher identified some next steps for the student and parents. Some of the expectations were implicit, but some were quite explicit. How were these messages missed? The parents seldom gave any specific goals for the student's achievement in the classroom. Why not? Do the parents believe they should not have goals for the student? A couple notable exceptions to this generalization occurred in Ms. Cooper's conferences. Why were these parents more directive?

I looked at the videotapes for areas that I believed would be an "ah-ha" for the participants, or a place that seemed uncomfortable as I viewed the videotaped interaction. I noted these places and compared the responses that teachers and parents gave when watching the videotape. My expectations were met in some cases, while in others the participants did not make comments about the shift in conversation, topic, or lack of up-take between the conversants. Again the question of my assumptions and expectations plagued me. What did the parents think about the moves that I had noted? After the parents, student, and teacher had an opportunity to stop the video and comment on what had taken place, I invited a response to some spots in the tape that had caught my attention. In some of the exchanges, the parents and teachers both thought there was little

significance to the interaction. In a couple of the exchanges there participants gave more explanation regarding the relationship or discourse history that shed light on what meaning could be attached to the exchange.

Using the information gained from the literature reviews of Chapters 1 and 2 and the triangulated data gathered as described in Chapter 3, I was prompted to consider the teacher's perspective when establishing the conference format. Chapter 4 provides the context for the discourse analysis and discussion in Chapter 5. The implications and recommendations generated by this study are presented in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 4

The Conference Format

Each teacher I observed had her own particular way of doing parent-teacher conferences. In this chapter, I give each teacher's perspective and justification for formatting her parent-teacher conference time in a particular manner. This view of the teachers' goals and perspectives will help situate the total conference experience. Then in the next chapter, I break the conference formats apart, compare and contrast individual conferences to draw out some similarities and effects of the parent-teacher conference.

In order to accomplish this explanation I analyzed my data in a variety of ways. First, I set my questions in front of me and looked at each individual conference event through my notes and videotape to see if any explicit answers to the focus questions were "right there" in the participants' words. I was unable to find any words that pointed me directly to answers. However, I did notice some interesting patterns in the conferences. I recognized that each conference seemed to have a pattern of topics covered and sequence of discourse moves that provided a framework for the conference even though the number of participants varied. I recorded these observations as possible avenues to explore further. I also recorded the tools that each participant employed to convey meaning. The words of the conference were primary, but paper exhibits were also a major part of the conference (Table 3).

Next, I looked at the preconference interviews to find what purposes the participants believed the conference served and what expectations or assumptions for which they may anticipate answers. I created a table of each participant's words that

seemed to identify the purpose of the conference (Table 4). I recorded general categories of words like reporting, grades, and relationships or knowing more about family.

Then I went back to the videotapes and watched just the body language and changing of positions to help me identify the level of engagement and comfort the participants may have been feeling. I recorded the points in each conference that raised a question for me and compared those points with the points where the participants had requested that the tape be stopped so they could give a comment during the stimulated video viewing.

I then looked at my data and regrouped pieces of information in relationship to the group identifiers of the participants, teachers, parent, and students. I asked questions such as: is there any similarity in the behaviors and words within these groups? What are the differences within the groups?

As I grouped and regrouped my data, I noticed that participants made statements that indicated they wished that something would have been different and then almost immediately would moderate the effect of the statement by a justification of people or experiences due to structures or elements that were not in the control of the participants. This led me to wonder if these justifications were due to societal behavior norms or roles of the individuals as played out in the groups; parent, teacher and student.

I continued to sort and re-sort the words of the participants, when I suddenly realized that I was looking only at what was said in the conference and about the conference. The question that I was not addressing had to do with what was not said and what was being demonstrated through the silence. Out of this analysis I have identified the following contexts for these conferences. The scenarios have been built by combining

elements of the participant's pre and postconference interviews, my notes, and videotapes of the conference.

In the Frontier School District, the teachers reported that they are given a good deal of autonomy in regard to the parent-teacher conference format. The two teachers I observed in this district utilized this freedom to structure their conferences with the parents to include the student. Even though some of the conferences had parents, teacher and students making them similar, the communication outcomes were different. The presence of the student created different dynamics in the conferences than the conferences at which students were not present. It is difficult to determine if the format of the conference was different due to any element being present or not, yet the level of satisfaction was mixed. In the following sections I explain how the conferences were conducted in each teacher's classroom.

Frontier School District

The conferences in the Frontier School District are scheduled for all the children in the classroom. The teachers are expected to have progress reports for all the students and use information from those reports as part of the parent-teacher conference. This is the last planned, structured conference for the school year. This conference time is also when teachers need to notify parents if their student is having difficulty completing the expected academic outcome for the grade (preconference interviews with Ms. Katti and Ms. Smith).

Ms. Smith's Conferences

Ms. Smith's conferences involved herself, parents and the student. In each of the observed conferences, only one parent was available for the specified conference time,

but Ms. Smith indicated that she likes to have both parents attend, if possible. The child is specifically invited to attend the conference and to take part in modeling the teacher's instructional strategies or to demonstrate new skills that the student has gained. Ms. Smith also said that in difficult conferences she alters this approach. "If the student were having difficulty (with academics) I would still have the student here, but I would have been more assertive" (video viewing interview).

Ms. Smith scheduled conferences for twenty minutes, but she said it was often difficult to keep such a tight schedule. The following is an example of how Ms. Smith's conferences flowed.

Ms. Smith greeted the parents and showed them where to sit. The round table where the conference took place was at the front of the room to the right of the entrance. A small shelf and chalkboard were within easy reach. The table had four student-size chairs for the participants. Ms. Kay, a student intern, attended both conferences I observed in this first-grade room. Ms. Smith said that Ms. Kay had been responsible for writing of some of the narrative reports. She then pulled a packet of materials to the center of the table while she spoke of her pleasure that each of the participants had taken the time to come. Her demeanor was positive and pleasant. She was smiling and had a light quality to her voice. She said that one of her goals during the conference was to relate to the parents the many positive things the student had accomplished and offer praise for the efforts the student had displayed. Ms. Smith indicated that she wasn't as up front with the parents in her first years of teaching and conferencing. She had believed if there was a problem, it was because she was not doing the job she needed to do and would not be willing to share the difficulties with the parents as quickly. But through the

years her views have changed and she now feels a need to solicit the parents help with difficulties the student is having (preconference interview).

Ms. Smith gave the parent a copy of her written narrative and then began to read from her copy. As the teacher read the narrative aloud, she periodically looked at the student and used her finger to track what she was reading. She did this to help the student see how this "story" is read and to make the student the central figure of this personal narrative.

At various points in each individual narrative, Ms. Smith interjected an interlude for explanation in simplified terms. An example of such an interlude is given below.

> She relies mainly on sight vocabulary and context clues. Her next step
> will be to sound out words as she reads. With consistent daily practice,
> she should be able to develop this ability. What that means is, when you
> are learning new words (audio transcript).

At times she asked the student to get a book or demonstrate the particular skill being addressed. In Shelly's conference, Ms. Smith wanted Shelly to demonstrate her ability to read her sight words. Another time Ms. Smith asked Shelly to get a book so that her mother could hear and see Shelly read (postconference interview). During these demonstration periods, Shelly's mother expressed her amazement about Shelly's improvement in reading and then shared how Shelly read at home.

In another conference the parent, Mrs. Mac, also responded about how Mac asked questions or tried to share his newly gained knowledge with her immediately upon her arrival at home each evening. Ms. Smith varied in how much she responded to each of the parent's input, but she generally acknowledged the information and validated what was being shared either directly or indirectly. Then Ms. Smith would return to the

narrative reading. Several times in the two conferences, Ms. Smith put the focus of the conference back to her narrative with a reminder that the time was passing. As the narrative reading closed, Ms. Smith paused so that the parent might address any additional concerns she had about the student. In the case of Mrs. Mac, the time had passed rather rapidly and when the parent was given a cue that it was her turn to talk, she leapt into the pause as though she was afraid she would miss the opportunity. Ms. Smith took time to answer her question and was genuinely responsive to the parent's request for information about an upcoming science project.

Ms. Smith's conferences then progressed through the cyclical readings of the narrative, with interludes of explanation, demonstration of instructional strategies, and more reading. When Mrs. Smith reached the end of narrative and had addressed the parent's questions, the scheduled time was often gone and the conference ended. Each of Ms. Smith's conference narratives addressed the specific content areas that she had determined earlier. She spent a great deal of time structuring the narrative so each student's work and progress would be positively highlighted and she could share the next steps for academic progress with the parents.

> It now takes me about two or three hours to do each child's preparation. I test each child, look over my recollection of anecdotal notes and records then write the narrative. I use a thesaurus and work very hard at using valuable language and positive terms about the student's work and the next steps that need to be worked on (postconference interview, March 1994).

These comments from Ms. Smith help to inform us as to why she was the dominant speaker in her parent-teacher conferences. The teacher used the majority of the time for reading the narrative, demonstrating instructional strategies through the child's

performance, and directing the parents in learning the next steps for the student. The parent's voice was heard in this conference format generally in response to the student and teacher's demonstration or in comment about the differences between the current instruction and what the parent remembered about his/her own educational experiences. In one of Ms. Smith's conferences, the parent does enter into a more extended interaction regarding reading instruction as a "sight word exercise" or a "sounding out" experience. Since this exchange of information is somewhat different than what I saw in the other conference that Ms. Smith conducted, I address some of the implications in more detail in the data in Chapter 5.

Ms. Katti's Conferences

Ms. Katti structured her conferences to be inclusive of the parents, student and teacher. She asked the student to be responsible for leading the conference. She explained her reasoning this way,

> Before the kids didn't come, there was a piece missing at conference time, their voice wasn't heard. And so last year we started to strongly encourage the children to come with their parents. And we just really like it a lot.

> Because it is more of a conversation and actually my role, I feel, is that this year I pull back and I feel that the child leads the conference depending on whatever he or she wants to show their parents. Um what they want to teach just where they go with everything (postconference interview).

Ms. Katti made it very clear that she sends home the traditional report information in the form of a written narrative on each child prior to the conference time. Her purpose in doing this is to give the parents an opportunity to read the information carefully, think about it, and formulate their questions or statements of concern. She has found this to be a useful way to prepare for the conference. She, as the teacher, fully apprised the parents

of her perspective regarding the student's progress and then asked them to have their own questions formed to bring to the discussion at conference time. She wants the conference to be an opportunity for the students to strut their stuff and feel good about what they have learned. She said it this way.

> I like the environment of the kids coming in. I really enjoy that a lot. It is relaxed. Parents have seen the stuff ahead of time, the focus is not the actual report card, it is more on you know what else is there that (the student) needs to work on for the rest of this year. What can we do to help with that? The child's thinking is real important (postconference interview).

Since Ms. Katti teaches a multi-age classroom of third and fourth graders, the conferences I analyzed included two third-grade girls and a fourth-grade boy. Ms. Katti had video taped her parent-teacher conferences in other years and she videotaped these conferences for March 1995. I used these new tapes as part of my study.

The conferences began with both parents being present for two of the conferences, along with the student and teacher. A widowed father, the student and the teacher attended the third conference. The seating arrangement for each conference was different.

Amber. Four desks were arranged adjacent to each other to form a large square table for Amber's conference. Amber's parents sat side by side. Ms. Katti was across the table from the parents and Amber stood at the head of the table closest to her mother.

Figure 6 Amber's Conference Table

108
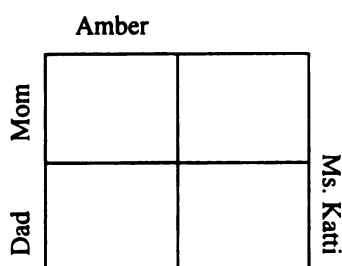
Amber led her conference standing at the head of the table. She had a couple of folders that held journal entries for the past year. As Amber led the conference she used these journals to take a reminiscent journey through her progress, much as one would look at a family scrapbook and conduct a running commentary on the events depicted. The parents in this conference offered nearly all of the support or scaffolding needed to keep Amber moving along and continuing her story.

Amber:	(Opens her journal and guides her mom's attention to her mathematics work.)
Ms. Katti:	We have just finished up geometry and we are ready to go into division.
Amber:	Here is where we first started, (student points to the journal)
Mrs. Amber:	Okay, (mom's eyes look at the journal, Amanda points out the language in her journal.)
Amber:	Here is my conjecture and mathematical…(inaudible)
Mrs. Amber:	(looks over the page), hmm, okay, How do I know?
Amber:	See, that word, and that word, and that word, (Amber points to specific parts of the page).
Mrs. Amber:	(nods and responds with hmm, okay etc. indicating that she is following)
Amber	(Then begins to read), How do we know to arrange the dots..
Mrs. Amber:	(scaffolding reads the groups of dots), they would be arranged like… five groups of…hmm and three groups of…
Amber:	Then we would do the problems, like multiplication.
Mr. Amber:	That has got to be the hardest thing for the kids isn't it, division?
Ms. Katti:	No, not really you just

Mr. Amber: Like jelly beans.

Ms. Katti   Put them into groups (uses her hands to demonstrate multiple groups of objects)

Although I couldn't always hear the words Mrs. Amber spoke, her tonal quality and the responses from Amber indicated questions were being asked. Amber's responses were also obviously answers to questions as she pointed out areas of explanation on the paper in front of her mother and herself. Simultaneous to this exchange between Amber and Mom, Dad entered into the discourse as he responded to Ms. Katti's opening statement about beginning division.

Ms. Katti was noticeably silent during much of the conference time. She offered two or three brief, quiet, almost whisper-like comments, to expand on Amber's explanations. During example of this (shown above), as Amber shifted topics and journals, Ms. Katti filled the space with an explanation about what the class was studying in mathematics. Ms. Katti seemed to be able to answer his concerns. Then attention easily shifted back to the interaction that had been occurring between mom and Amber. The conference continued with Amber leading the tour through her journals, demonstrating her academic progress and ability to handle technical language. Amber used words like pentomino and conjectures to explain what has been happening in mathematics over the past marking period.

Steve. Another conference included Steve, Mr. and Mrs. Steve, and Mrs. Katti. They sat at a row of desks arranged side by side with Steve, Mr. and Mrs. Steve on one side of the desks and Ms. Katti facing them on the other side of the desks (see desk arrangement).

Figure 7 Steve's Conference Table

	Mr Steve	Mrs. Steve	Steve

Ms. Katti

The conference with Steve, his mom and dad, and the teacher exhibited different interaction dynamics. Once again the teacher's silence was noticeable. The conference began with general talk about issues in the school district regarding new scheduling of school hours. The parents initiated the information sharing and asked Ms. Katti what she thought about the potential changes. Ms. Katti responded by making a rather noncommittal comment, "I really don't know" (videotape) and passed the conversation lead back to the parents. After a few more comments Ms. Katti asked Steve if he had some information he wanted to share with his parents. Steve took the prompt and retrieved his journals to use as he led the conference. During this conference Steve visually appealed to Ms. Katti for support several times. Ms. Katti responded by offering various scaffolding comments that encouraged Steve so that he continued with his information or remained silent. Steve's parents also provided the scaffolding that moved the report along.

Mrs. Steve: What you got?

Steve: Ummm a science page and I took a lot of notes
               (Steve's eyes go to the teacher's face)
               it was when I was...

Mrs. Steve: (moves the journal to provide better opportunity to read from it)

Steve:	Learning about the different things on earth (A three-second pause occurs here).
Mr. Steve:	What kind of different things? (Steve's eyes again go to the teacher, two seconds pass)
Steve:	a lot of different things
Ms. Katti:	What did you do your research on?
Spencer:	(looks at his journal for support) The moving mantle
Mrs. Steve:	Oh, yeah we had moving mantles at our house. (Mom then nods and looks at the teacher and back to Steve and smiles).
Steve:	smiles and three seconds pass
Mrs. Steve:	yep, he practiced at home (mom moves her hands to indicate a up and down motion) yep,

Ms. Katti here takes the opportunity to reinforce the work that both Steve and his

parents have done in supporting learning on the topic of mantles. She has remained quiet

through a good portion of this exchange, even when Steve's eyes looked toward her,

giving the appearance of an appeal for help in explaining his information. Ms. Katti's

silence provided an opportunity for Steve's parents to scaffold this explanation. As Ms.

Katti provided wait time and positive comments, the parents continue to supply

information about the learning they were involved in with their child.

Ms. Katti:	I thought that was a great way to teach. Was that your idea?
Mrs. Steve:	Actually, no I think it was theirs (nodding toward Steve)
Steve:	It was kind of Mary's idea.
Mrs. Steve:	Mary, yeah, we were all talking about it. Figured it was a good way to get kids involved.
Ms. Katti:	Umm (nods her head in approval) tell your mom and dad what we are studying about right now.

Steve has been in Ms. Katti's class two years. He used technical language in explaining his science project of shifting mantels and he used the conference sharing to give credit to his teammates, demonstrating his respect for the knowledge of others. The focus of this conference changed from the paper-pencil exhibits when Ms. Katti suggested that Steve demonstrate his social studies HyperCard stack to his parents. The parents, teacher, and Steve moved to the computer located at the side of the room. As Steve narrated this section of the conference he was more at ease and the parents were very attentive to the knowledge Steve possessed. Their comments indicated that they were uncertain about this new type of learning. They were no longer providing a scaffold, rather the questions seemed to be more information seeking.

Ms. Katti: Do you want to show your mom and dad your ecosystem HyperCard stack?

Mrs. Steve: He said he wanted to show that to us

               (Steve leads the way to the computer)

Ms. Katti: Tell them where you are going and where it is at.
               (This is a reference to the use of computer files.)

Steve: I am going to where my place is at, right here.

Mrs. Steve: Where is that?

               (Steve moves through several windows on the computer)

Ms. Katti: California, there were three people in a group and that is what

Mr. Steve: Oh, so you did animals in the dessert?

Steve: No, snakes, and he reads text from the computer. (He continues to move through his "stack" of pages and text about the Southwest area.

Mr. Steve: How did you do that picture, Steve?

Steve: I drew it.

Mr. Steve: Drew it by the computer and then…

Steve: Yea.

Mrs. Steve: That's pretty good. Where did you get that?

Steve: (inaudible)

Ms. Katti: Steve scanned it.

Mrs. Steve: I need something scanned on my computer at work can you come scan it?

Mr. Steve: Laughs

This change to computer generated reports positions the parents as learners. It appears that Steve has a substantial understanding about the use of computer software to generate and compile information. He is still developing his vocabulary to describe what he does when using the computer. By changing the known reporting medium (paper pencil artifacts to electronic HyperCard Stack) a power shift is obvious. The parents are no longer as adept at scaffolding Steve as he reports; rather Ms. Katti provides some support to the communication of Steve's learning.

Ms. Katti: California, there were three people in a group.
               Steve scanned it.

Rhonda. The third videotaped conference in Ms. Katti's room included Rhonda, her father, and Ms. Katti. Rhonda, a third grader is the younger of two children in her family. She has an older sister in the sixth grade. The participants in this conference sat at a long table formed by several desks placed side by side. Mr. Rhonda and Rhonda sat side by side on student chairs with Ms. Katti across from them.

Figure 8 Rhonda's Conference Table

Mr. Rhonda		Rhonda

Ms. Katti

The interaction for this conference was light with lots of humor. Mr. Rhonda set the tone by his joking manner with both Rhonda and Ms. Katti. Mr. Rhonda was involved in recruiting help for the school carnival that would be held in the next few weeks. His demeanor exhibited familiarity with the school personnel and its workings.

Ms. Katti prompted Rhonda to begin the conference by showing her dad her work. Rhonda's verbal expression was hesitant and appeared less structured than the previous conference formats. Rhonda had been given time in class to think about how she would share. Rhonda chose to show her writing first. She had written a large number of pages for the particular story she had marked in her journal to share. Mr. Rhonda continued his joking manner as he pointed out how messy the work was. He said that correcting Rhonda's disorganized, messy, work pattern has been an ongoing goal (videotaped conference transcript). Mr. Rhonda also pressed Rhonda for a title to the story that she was trying to share. Ms. Katti moved in to rescue Rhonda from this challenge to her celebration of work.

> I felt he was pressing on her to give him an answer. Its journal writing you
> know its just you write whatever you want to write about (video viewing
> interview).

This kind of move and countermove occurred throughout the conference so that the teacher in this parent-teacher conference became an active ally and proponent for the

student's sharing performance. Rhonda was not adept at handling her father's humorous comments in a manner that allowed her achievements to shine through. Ms. Katti helped focus the interaction on the positive aspects in Rhonda's exhibits.

Once again the interaction here centered on a conversation between the parent and student with the teacher offering support as needed so the student could strut her stuff. The number of verbal moves that Ms. Katti made for Rhonda's conference differed from the two previous conferences, but her main goal of encouraging the student to spotlight her/his academic progress was evident.

Sunset School District

Ms. Cooper's Conferences

Ms. Cooper had been out of the classroom for five weeks on family medical leave. She agreed to participate in this study because she believes parent-teacher conferences are important (preconference interview). Ms. Cooper's conferences were located in a portable classroom outside the main elementary building (see Figure 5). She had set up her adult-sized conference table at the back of the room facing toward the entry area. This small rectangular table held each student's work in a file folder. The work in the student file folder was in particular order in relationship to the talk of the conference. Ms. Cooper greeted the parents from the conference table area as they entered.

In the spring, Sunset School District contacted parents of children identified as having difficulty in school to set up parent-teacher conferences. The school office arranged the appointment times so parents with several school-age children would only need to come to the school once (postconference interview with Ms. Cooper). All parents were welcome to schedule a parent-teacher conference during this time, but parents of

children experiencing difficulty were *expected* to arrange to be at the school for the parent-teacher conference. The following is a diagram of the seating arrangement for the parent-teacher conferences in Ms. Cooper's room at Sunset School District.

Figure 9 Ms. Cooper's Conference Table
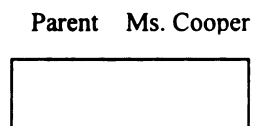
Parent Ms. Cooper

Heidi. The second of four children, Heidi is a third-grader. Her stepfather and mother are concerned and active in her education. Ms. Cooper stated that she believed Heidi's parents are concerned, but need help with parenting (postconference interview).

As this conference began Mrs. Heidi moved from the entry area to the conference area. Simultaneously, Ms. Cooper moved from the back part of the room toward the conference table. Mrs. Heidi asked for a tissue to use, since she had signs of a cold. Ms. Cooper said the tissues were back by the sink, but she wanted them conveniently located on the table. Mrs. Heidi used a tissue, but did not place the box of tissues on the conference table. Ms. Cooper again stated, while pointing to the spot on the table, that the tissues needed to be on the conference table and in the designated place. This exchange was but one of the interactions that set the overall tone of the conference. Ms. Cooper established, early on, where the control for this conference was positioned.

Mrs. Heidi said in the postconference interview that she felt she was unable to get the "school" to understand her student's learning needs. Mrs. Heidi used words that focused the power for the conference in an "institution of school." Although the words

117

exchanged were congenial and no overt animosity was present the territory was divided and the discourse was established. Both Ms. Cooper and Mrs. Heidi agreed that the school and parents were operating from different views of the child (postconference interview).

The conference was ordered much as the conferences already described. First a greeting, then the work of the conference began as the teacher led discussion of the academic content, language arts, mathematics, social studies and science. The teacher again led the discussion of issues connected to Heidi's interpersonal skills. They discussed Heidi's academic progress; Ms. Cooper addressed concerns she had previously expressed about Heidi's learning abilities. Ms. Cooper mentioned documents from a recent special education committee meeting early in the conference. Mrs. Heidi asked a question regarding Heidi's progress in spelling while completing writing assignments.

Ms. Cooper answered the question by giving an elaborate explanation of how memorization and repetition are the key to learning words. Much of the instructional information involved asking Mrs. Heidi to use classroom instruction techniques at home. The interaction then moved on to the topic of mathematics, social studies and returned to grammar and spelling. Ms. Cooper tried to explain why Mrs. Heidi couldn't take all of the paper exhibits home the day of the conference. The conference ended as Ms. Cooper's next parent arrived. Mrs. Heidi's appointment was brought quickly to a close.

Al. The conference with Al's mother was somewhat different from Heidi's conference. Al is a third grade boy that has recently been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) by an outside testing source. He is the younger of two adopted children and has been experiencing school difficulty for some time. Ms. Cooper tutored

Al during the summer before he came to third grade. She has an extended history of interaction with Mr. and Mrs. Al (postconference interview with Mrs. Al).

Mrs. Al arrived a few minutes late for her appointment time and Ms. Cooper was still in discussion with Mrs. Heidi. Immediately, as Mrs. Al entered the classroom, Ms. Cooper brought Mrs. Heidi's conference to a close. Ms. Cooper walked to the front of the room to support Mrs. Heidi's departure and welcome Mrs. Al. The transition appeared smooth and comfortable.

As Ms. Cooper and Mrs. Al moved toward the conference area, Mrs. Al joked about being late and asked to be forgiven. Ms. Cooper took up the same tone and in a light fashion asked about Mr. Al, so it appeared that the apology for being late was accepted. The conference continued in this jovial tone and Mrs. Al produced her agenda for discussion. She joked about her excessive preparedness as they began the interaction. Ms. Cooper accepted Mrs. Al's lead in the conference agenda. It is important to note that Mrs. Al did ask if it was acceptable for her to proceed with the information that she and Ms. Cooper had discussed earlier, indicating that this approach to the conference was different than the "norm."

Mrs. Al read aloud from the information she had gathered from her outside readings. At various times Ms. Cooper would draw Mrs. Al's attention to an example of Al's work in relationship to a point that was read from Mrs. Al's source. Periodically Ms. Cooper pointed out the similarities and differences between what was reported about ADD students in general and the specific work exhibits from Al during the year.

The conversation then shifted more into Ms. Cooper's arena, as she used the portfolio of Al's work to talk about his classroom progress. Occasionally Mrs. Al would

direct attention to the information she had gained about the needs of an ADD child in relationship to what Ms. Cooper was explaining. Mrs. Al pointed out several difficulties that Al had experienced during Ms. Cooper's absence from the classroom for her five-week leave. Ms. Cooper listened and offered to work with Al on some work that was of particular concern to Mrs. Al. Ms. Cooper also suggested that Al return to the classroom after school and they would go over some of the material that he was struggling with. It seems that Ms. Cooper and Al are close and she often sees him after school is finished for the day. Al often returns to school to retrieve forgotten textbooks or homework.

Ms. Cooper and Mrs. Al discussed at length, ways to foster more responsible behavior in Al. Again, in this conference as in Heidi's conference, Ms. Cooper used reprinted articles as take home materials for the parent. However, Ms. Cooper gave a verbal affirmation that Mrs. Al will read and use the information. "You're the kind of mom that will read this information" (videotaped conference,).

The conference ended when Mrs. Al realized that she must be at the next teacher's room. Ms. Cooper asked to keep the list of ADD information so that she might share it at a teacher's meeting. Mrs. Al agreed and gathered her things to move on to a new teacher.

Summary

This has provided an overall conference context from which I move into the analysis of the discourse for these parent-teacher conferences in Chapter 5. None of these conferences appear strikingly different or unusual. Conferences like these with children present and even those being led by the student have been occurring for a number of years across the country. The time frame, of a scheduled 20 to 30 minutes is also a common format. All of these conferences were held at the local school building where the children

normally attend class. There were no volatile outbursts and each conference appeared to be an informative congenial interaction. So what part does discourse play within these conferences? The following analysis in Chapter 5 may open up some additional avenues of understanding.

CHAPTER 5

Overview

In Chapter 1, I set the context for why I am interested in pursuing an understanding of the effects of discourse on the parent-teacher conference. I appraised the background of individual meanings, how they are generally formed and what information is an integral part. I highlighted the research regarding the benefit of home-school connections, presented prominent models of interaction as they are currently being used in schools, and demonstrated how words can remain constant while meanings change within the literacy curriculum. I expanded the discussion of discourse, theories of teaching and learning and the potential effect of this information on communication as it occurs in the classroom and conference setting in Chapter 2. I described my research methods and informants in Chapter 3. In Chapter 3, I also addressed my procedures for generating this study. I included a description of my participants, tools and methods. In Chapter 4, I described the ways the teachers designed their parent-teacher conferences and their rationale for doing so. In this chapter I consider the effects of the discourse of parent-teacher conference from the perspectives of parents, teachers and students. In analyzing this data, I found myself aligning with each participant at different times. My own history of experiences as a teacher, a parent, and a student shaded my understandings, much as different lenses in a pair of glasses give different views of the same object. As mentioned in Chapter 2, culture, history, and society are integral in understanding what is happening in any given speech event. This chapter presents possible interpretations of what occurred from the perspective of a researcher, parent, teacher, and student.

First I consider the discourse history for the participants of these parent-teacher conferences. I look at their stated expectations for the parent-teacher conference and at the ways in which their prior experiences with parent-teacher conferences may have shaped those expectations, generated from the prior experiences of the participants as they enter into this specific speech event.

Section One: Individual Discourse History Creates Ways of Acting and Responding in Conferences

Each parent arrived at the conference possessing a history of interactions with individuals in the school environment. Responses to these interactions have left a history that created generalizations, which form the basis for expectations of what may occur in future exchanges with people in the school environment. These generalizations inform the creation of meaning and interpretation of words. The experiences that parents and teachers have had as students themselves help to determine how they interpret other interactions in the education arena. For example, if a parent was successful in school and found the classroom to be a nurturing, caring environment, those reconstructed memories will prompt them to have similar expectations for their child's classroom environment. On the other hand, if they remember school classrooms as places where ridicule and hurt were primary experiences, they may interpret their child's interactions from a different perspective and perhaps form their responses accordingly.

Just as each parent arrived at the conference with a history of interactions, so did the teacher. These most current exchanges add to this ribbon of discourse and the process of generating the most current strand of discourse history between the current teacher and parent during the year. These discourse interchanges may cover the topics the parent mentioned below in Figure 10. When the number of topics and exchanges are multiplied by the number of parents in the teacher's classroom, the teacher's discourse history has the potential of being a real blend of both positive and negative experiences.

These exchanges may seem insignificant as any one speech event, yet often teachers and parents begin to build their assumptions and expectations of future

interactions on a number of similar, seemingly insignificant exchanges creating an

interwoven ribbon of multiple strands (speech events). Through multiple speech events, a

ribbon of discourse is developed, which then creates an understanding of what is

acceptable and appropriate within a similar discourse event. These ribbons of discourse

are then brought to the parent-teacher conference where conceptions of language,

meaning, and often intent, are formed, which create a sense of satisfaction or discontent.

The language of the parent-teacher conference then may look like this.

Figure 10 Discourse Interchanges
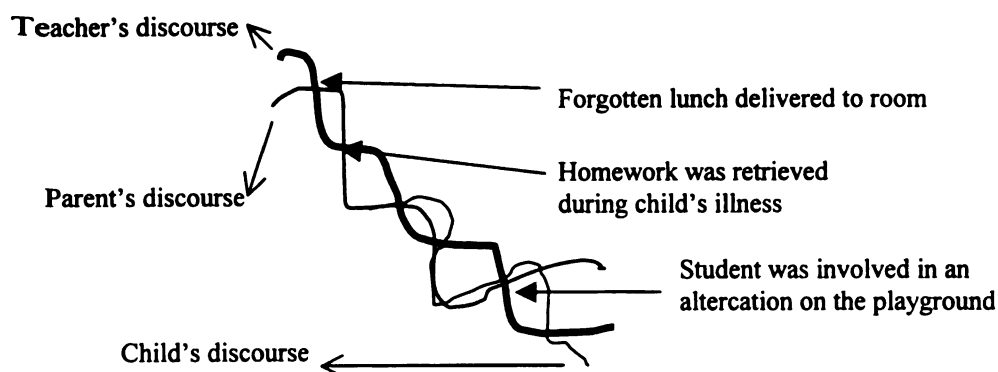
These ribbons of discourse vary as the diagram above depicts. The parent's

discourse history with education personnel is shown as lighter in intensity than the

teachers, but darker than the child's, since the parent may have experienced fewer

interactions in similar school discourse events than the teacher, but more than the child.

Likewise the child's discourse ribbon is of fewer strands and shorter due to fewer years of

discourse experience. I indicated earlier that discourse interactions have societal norms

that allow some responses and limits others. One category of responses is created by the

rules for politeness in public interactions. These public interactions generally include the discourse of the parent-teacher conference where the possibilities and constraints of politeness rules.

Politeness in Public Situations

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), in order to consider public social interactions, we must understand what characteristics we are assuming the participants possess and the parameters within which they operate. In the case of the parent-teacher conference we are assuming that each individual possesses "face and rationality." Each participant is a rational being, a person who is able to reason from "ends to a means that will achieve those ends" (p. 63). Further, each participant has two desires, "to be unimpeded and to be approved of in certain aspects" (ibid.).

With these two characteristics in place, one can assume the participants of the parent-teacher conference desire to accomplish specific goals and to be respected, thereby, establishing the parent-teacher conference as a social event that occurs within the normal parameters of the rules for politeness. In order to make sense of what is being said at the parent-teacher conference we know that parents, teachers, and students make choices regarding the meaning of the words that are uttered according to the social norms they follow for this event.

The greeting of the parent-teacher conference provides a brief example of how teachers, parents and students come together and are positioned by the social norms as well as the language of the conference.

Meaning is generated through the discourse histories that are brought to the conference, including knowledge regarding the social rules of politeness. In the greetings

I present below, I demonstrate how, in part, the greeting segment of the parent-teacher conference can be relatively innocuous or have the potential to be quite defining in relationship to the discourse positions (way of being, speaking, responding) each participant assumes.

In the explanation to follow, the idea of saving or losing face reflects the participant's freedom of action and freedom from imposition. Participants in the parent-teacher conference also have the right to a positive self-image that is valued by others and the right to be considered rational individuals.

Combining these two ideas that the choices in language operate to position conversants in relationship to the participant's perception of saving or losing face in the interaction, gives me a lens to consider what occurs during the parent-teacher conference. In order to understand what is occurring in the conferences, I found it imperative to establish context. These parents, teachers, and students each have a discourse history.

Discourse History for These Conferences

Since these parent-teacher conferences occurred in the spring, the participants have a shared discourse history. In this next section I have summarized the discourse history that each teacher and parent group had developed throughout the year. As indicated earlier, the teachers and parents have had various opportunities to interact through conversations and information exchanges, in both oral and written form throughout the year. The teachers in our parent-teacher conferences reported that they made contact with parents through a variety of means. Communication with the parents of students included the items indicated in Table 2 (below).

The classroom teachers produce many of the textual items. Samples of some of these items are in the appendices. Appendix F contains the weekly newsletters that Mrs. Smith sends home with her students in the Friday folder. Appendix G is a sample of the narrative report that is issued at conference time in conjunction with Appendix H, the formal report form. Appendix I includes samples of the informational articles that Mrs. Cooper sent home with parents who attended conferences.

Table 3 Textual and Oral Discourse History

Item	Administrative (serves the district's record functions)	Reporting (unidirectional – teacher to parent)	Sharing (bi-directional)
Classroom News		Classroom events	Developmental information
Friday Folders	Permission slips school forms Requesting information	Collection of classroom work for the week Interactive letters noting progress	Interactive letters noting progress or requesting information
Informal Hallway Chats		School event information Short term scheduling concerns accomplishments	Short term scheduling concerns accomplishments
Community Event Chats			Social sharing
School Open House	Introduction to policy and procedures	Classroom schedule	
Report Cards	Specific academic and social progress	Specific academic and social progress	
Informational Articles/ Reprints		Special needs information	Various developmental information
Telephone Calls	Report of discipline health concerns	Report of discipline; Health concerns	Request for help/snacks etc. specific concerns for individual student

The discourse history for these parents and teachers began early in the fall as teachers sent home written information or letters. Sometimes these letters were for the

parents to read and required no response; other times the parents were asked to respond

by furnishing information for the school district or the teacher's informational files. Each

classroom used a once a week folder (Friday folders) to deliver student work to the

parents. Teachers often included further textual materials in these Friday folders such as

work sheets that the students had worked on during the week in the classroom. Teachers

also used the Friday folder to transport pertinent articles, (i.e., reprints from journals or

professional sources) which included information about children's developmental levels

that the teachers believed would be useful to parents.

Probably the most formal textual materials school districts provide are report

forms for grades and progress reports. The teachers from the Frontier District said that

they made extensive revisions to their progress reports with the intent of improving this

reporting tool, so they could document and communicate a more complete picture of the

student's progress to parents. The teachers in this school district indicated that they go

beyond the check (✓), check plus (✓+), and check minus (✓-) markings by writing one-

to two-page narratives reporting the performance level of the student in a carefully

worded story form. One of their goals was to make the report share more information

about the student's progress beyond a grade level, such as "A," "B," or "C." One teacher

sends these reports home before the conference so the time spent interacting with the

parents may be spent answering their responses to the information already received.

Oral Discourse History

The discourse history of the participants, developed partly through oral

interactions during the year, includes interactions that range from casual, brief exchanges

of comments in the hall before and after school, telephone conversations regarding

forgotten lunches or information sheets, to the more formal public interaction of the fall open house held at school. Table 3 Textual and Oral Discourse History shows the tools for communication that were given in the responses by both teachers and parents during my interviews.

This table shows the items, used to communicate during the school year, as identified by the teachers or parents during my interviews. The categories of administrative, reporting, and sharing list the functions that each of these communication mediums served. This categorization demonstrates that some items serve more than one function. The *administrative* category lists ways that each item serves the greater district needs of securing information and documenting communication with parents in relationship to state department of education mandates. The *reporting* section also serves some administrative function but is concerned more with the teacher's need to communicate with parents for the purpose of meeting the immediate educational needs of the student.

No mandate requires classroom teachers to share developmental information with the parents, yet teachers in this study seemed to believe that this information was helpful for parents. The implied belief is that if parents understand their child's developmental progress better, they will be able to meet those developmental needs at home, which will in turn help the child progress academically in the classroom. The sharing category identifies the way items function to allow more interaction between parents and teachers. This category also includes a greater potential for more relationships to be developed on an informal level.

What the Parents Believe

Parents said they believe the teachers were very available to them. The schools

had an open door policy, so that parents felt they had easy access to address concerns at

almost anytime with the teacher.

> The only thing is I wish we had more time, it takes a lot of time from the
> teachers, I tend to try the best to set up my meetings so I can extend a little
> more time, so I don't extend on someone else's time, it doesn't mean we
> can't take more time, these teachers are very available, I come every day
> and pick up my kids from school, not every parent does. They are
> certainly available. They are more prepared at this (the conference)
> juncture they are more focused in on one subject, and that is talking about
> each individual student and it is a good environment to explore (interview
> with Mr. Rhonda, March).

Notice, though this parent wishes he had more time with the teacher at the parent-

teacher conference, he does believe that the teachers are "very available." Mr. Rhonda

stated, however, that he believes the teacher is more focused on his child at the parent-

teacher conference. All the parents said they received a quick response to any problem at

the school or concern they may have expressed during the year. An example of that

confidence came from Mrs. Mac with regard to a problem with Mac fighting at school.

> Whenever there is a problem that arises, regardless of whether he has a
> problem with another child or, umm whatever, the case may be, she will
> call and talk with me about that...before the problem escalates or anything
> she will be very informal we converse in between; before the actual
> parent-teacher conference (Mrs. Mac interview).

Mrs. Mac further stated that she felt free to contact Ms. Smith at home if she

needed to.

> I have no problem calling her at home, as I have done before whenever
> Mac has to bring something or whatever and he doesn't bring the
> appropriate information home or I have a misunderstanding with him then
> I'll call her and she doesn't have any problem (Mrs. Mac interview).

Though Mrs. Mac is very supportive of Ms. Smith, she does believe that the reason such freedom exists (that Ms. Smith will call Mrs. Mac or Mrs. Mac can call Ms. Smith at their respective homes) is due to the philosophy of the school district. She reflected on a previous school district her children had been in and believed the difference in freedom of communication was not an issue of personality, but school district's philosophy.

> He used to go, I used to live in Shaketon, and he went to Hazelwood in
> kindergarten and uh that place was nothing like (here), (laughs) um they,
> here they are very informing; they (Frontier Distict) keep you updated on
> everything and in Shaketon, its like you know they talk about what you
> learn over the term and everything, I don't remember how they did it there
> but it wasn't, I didn't feel, as comfortable with well if you need to bring
> something, or whatever, I could call them (Shaketon teachers) at home
> NOOO (Mrs. Mac interview).

Each parent expressed a strong belief that the current teachers are knowledgeable, caring individuals and deserved the trust that the parents had placed in them. Yet, each of the parents spoke of other experiences with teachers and school personnel that were not positive. Some past school experiences were not fulfilling and even some current team teacher interactions had generated frustrating interactions. One parent reported that during the spring conference time, another teacher with whom she had had a conference was unable to explain the content of math materials clearly enough for the parent to help her child do schoolwork at home.

> When I talk to (his math teacher) she'll tell me something and I'll just sit
> there for a minute like--what was that--can you explain that to me again,
> ya know I don't understand, ya know she showed me his math. She did go
> over it with me once, a couple of months ago and I was confused then and
> I talked to some other parents and they were confused (okay) so maybe
> that would have been helpful in how do you do that, what do you do, bring
> parents all to the class umm (Mrs. Al interview).

These responses show that parents organize their explanations of parent-teacher interactions along temporal lines. Parents talked about the current classroom teacher by comparing her to other teachers their child had experienced in past years. Parents also related experiences with the current teacher in relationship to previous years when she instructed another of their children. An additional way that parents talked about the teacher was in relationship to other parents' experiences over time. This temporal ordering of information seems to be prevalent in parent's consideration of school experiences.

Mehan (1986) in his research of language in special education meetings found that parents refer frequently to student's progress over a span of time. In their postconference reflections about school and teachers, parents also have used a comparative temporal frame for talking about their experiences. Seldom do they talk about other arenas of interaction for their basis of comparison such as the teacher is like my doctor who listens or doesn't listen. Rather the parents compare one teacher to another as though the expectation is for all teachers to perform in a similar manner. This kind of comparison is considered in the final chapter.

In one of the school districts it seems to be an acceptable policy for parents to request specific teachers. The parents I interviewed took this opportunity for choice very seriously, as expressed below.

> Mr. Barnard sent a note home saying we only had until (date) to indicate
> our preference for teachers for next year. I talked to Ms. Cooper. I also
> had her for Jenny (interview with Mrs. Al).

Is this is a matter of perspective over time? Given the opportunity for each new year to unfold, parents have a persistent hope that their student is getting the best they can

obtain for them. Yet, when the year is done and its totality considered, does the

reconstruction of what occurred during the year in relationship to the actual outcome,

change their beliefs about the experience? This may be a worthwhile investigation for

another time.

What Teachers Believe About Their Communication With Parents

All of the teachers indicated that they have numerous and lengthy telephone

conversations with the parents of their students during the year. The teachers also work

very hard at send home newsletters from the classroom, as well as memos from the

building administrators.

Two of the three teachers said they spent what they perceived as being a huge

amount of time trying to keep accurate daily records of each student as well as keeping

the parents informed regarding the student on a weekly basis. One teacher indicated that

she was always looking for interesting informational articles that would be useful for

specific families and she would copy the articles to send to them. These articles may be

about general child developmental issues or about parenting classes that may be offered

in the area. One teacher responded to a parent's request for extra textbooks to have at

home because her student so frequently was not getting the appropriate books home to

complete the homework assignments.

Parents and teachers said that all of the information they gained came through the

two major mediums, oral conversations or written text. One teacher (Ms. Katti) reported

that she is in the process of developing an electronic portfolio for use in the conferences.

During the conference she also had each of her students demonstrate the use of the

computer and a HyperStack report for their parents.

Stated Purpose of the Conference

The teachers were one source for knowing the stated purpose of the spring conference. They reported their perceptions for the function of conferences in the district as an administrative decision, including their understanding of the freedom they have in structuring the conference as well as their personal goals for the conferences. During the interviews with the parents and students, I gained further information regarding their perceptions for the purpose of conferences. In this next section I will cover what the teachers and parents understand about the purpose and goals for the parent-teacher conference. Just as the communication mediums served several functions (administrative, reporting, and sharing) the teachers' and parents' statements regarding their understanding of conferencing offers some insight into these purposes within a larger context of the district and state mandates.

I asked about goals and purposes in two forms to try to determine what the participants believed regarding the purposes of parent-teacher conferences. Table 4 displays what teachers and parents believed represented the school administrator or school's purpose for designating so much time for the parent-teacher conference as well as her/his personal purposes.

Table 4 District Function of the Parent-Teacher Conference

Group	Purpose of School District	Personal Purposes
Teachers	• Report • Coincides with formal report card so it can be discussed • Establish rapport • Set goals with parents • Get information	• Report good things • Observe child and parents • Gain insights • Gain information • Report the good news • Make it a two-way communication • Establish rapport • Give progress report • Identify joint goals for child • Communicate goals • Communicate expectations • Communicate school performance
Parents	• Find out child's progress • Find his relative position in grade • Give child opportunity to show off work • Teacher can express concerns to parents • Get information about home events • Get acquainted with teacher • Formal opportunity to meet with teacher • Structured communication • Raise the parent's level of comfort	• Gain knowledge that child is doing well in school and getting along with others • Keep open communication
Students	• Find out what student needs to do • Find out how student is getting along with everything	• Get to hear what actually goes on

Multiple Perspectives of the Purpose and Function of Conferences in School

What are some ways to classify the words parents and teachers used during the

parent-teacher conference? Wertsch (1991) uses comparative categories like familiar and

academic to classify word choices of children and teachers. Teachers use words that are

often dichotomous (yes or no) in nature. Children are more descriptive and affective in

their choice of words. For example when a child describes a piece of volcanic rock that is

being presented during Show and Tell, the teacher wants words like hard/soft, big/little

used to describe the rock. The student used words like nice, safe, and careful when talking about the rock (Wertsch, 1991).

Another way to think about classifying words is to focus on words that build relationships or words that present information and report facts (Gudykunst, 1991). Bakhtin (Wertsch, 1991) classifies words as internally persuasive or authoritative. Internally persuasive language is generative language that incorporates more open-endedness and ways to mean. Internally persuasive language provides an opportunity for both the hearer and speaker to generate new ideas from the utterances being used. Authoritative statements are more closed in nature; the tones and actual words leave the hearer as the receptor of information, with little room for challenge or alternate views. Classroom language has often been described as authoritative language.

I considered the words of teachers and parents in relationship to two categories, which combine some of these ideas. One category denotes formal language. This formal language is more propositional, where information is to be presented as static and singularly interpreted. It allows for less interaction and expansion on the part of the hearer. Cazden (1988) uses the idea of "teacher talk" as a more formal use of language and words. The words in teacher talk are more focused on reporting facts than on creating an invitation to respond.

The second category is relational words. This language category allows for the joint development of the information by combining generative and affective words. Words used from this category are concerned more with the establishment of shared information and generative responses. Relational words include language that invites response and elaboration. This category of words includes words that jointly generate

meanings and involve active listening and responding. Many examples of "take up" are

evident and focus on repetition of the words the speakers use. I have reorganized the

words from Tables 1 and 2 into two new categories, formal language and relational

language. In another section, I discuss the work of the conference by looking at the

language used in relationship to teacher's stated purposes and goals and whether the

words are primarily formal or relational words.

Table 5 Types of Language

Formal Language	Relational Language
• Report • Report good things • Get information • Find out child's progress • Find his relative position in grade • Teacher can express concerns to parents • Get information about home events • Formal opportunity to meet with teacher • Structured communication	• Establish rapport • Set goals with parents • Coincides with formal report card so that it can be discussed • Identify joint goals for child • Open communication • Get acquainted with teacher • Raise the parent's level of comfort • Give child opportunity to show off work

The classification of language (Table 5) is obviously subjective because I have

assigned meanings to the parents' and teacher's use of terms. I have tried to classify these

purposes based on the ways in which teachers and parents described their expectations

during our interviews. In the first column, formal language, the words like report, get,

find out, get information, and structured are words that indicate the information is

determined and remains static. These words are more product-oriented and less process-

oriented. Going back to our discussion of meanings in Chapter 2, we see that a definition

of language meaning, as being fixed, is present in these words. "It" is very much present

in these purposes. In the purposes for the parent-teacher conference the "it" is this

information, exhibits of what the child can do, and the way the student is.

The relational words are more process oriented and less product-directed. Words like establish rapport, discussion, joint goals, have student show work, get acquainted, and raise comfort level are all phrases and concepts that leave room for new and different perspectives throughout the interaction. The relational words seem to allow more room for clarification and generating new pictures during the interaction. I analyzed actual sections of the parent-teacher conference with a running comparison of the words from the statements of purpose and goals with the words of the conference.

This next section introduces the similarities and differences of the parent-teacher conferences to determine if there is a ritual or formula for the conference talk.

Assumptions and Expectations

Our world has become more diverse, or at least people are more willing to recognize the degree of diversity that exists in our world than in past years. The metaphors to describe the diversity of population in the United States have changed in recent years. In the past America was known as the melting pot of the world. Today we are referred to as the salad bowl of the world. This recognition of the cultural and ethnic diversity in our country and, by extension, in our schools has created great potential as well as great problems in effective communication. A second-language learner will acknowledge that a new language can be learned without the speaker becoming fluent. Educators may also know about ways of communicating without being able to communicate fluently.

Often times our ways of speaking cast a thin veneer over our assumptions and stereotypic reactions. Since people acquire through culturally specific absorption most of our language assumptions, we seldom think carefully about the underlying expectations

we have of a communication event prior to the event. The parent-teacher conference is an event that calls for careful thinking about our expectations of outsiders and is useful, even critical, in fostering shared understandings. The use of the word "outsiders" is drawn from the previous reference in Chapter 1 to the exclusiveness and encompassing traits for the home and school (Goffman, 1961). This trait can create the sense of insider and outsider when the participants of the parent-teacher conference come together.

Gee (1990) supports the potential for such a dichotomy due to the nature of language and Discourse communities. Gudykunst (1991) also offers further information about the potential of an insider and outsider perspective when we consider the ethnocentricity that is present within groups of people.

In this case I am intending that anyone outside the education field would fall into the category of an outsider; those within the field of education are considered insiders. The possibility exists that the circles may be drawn even closer so that anyone outside a given community of educators, i.e., a specific building of teachers, may be the "others" (and suspect of lacking knowledge).

This knowing and forming expectations brings to bear the general teaching and learning view of school and conferences from prior school experiences as well as school as an institution responsibility to "report" in addition to the current parent teacher view of more recent interactions. Using this insight, I examined communication in the parent-teacher conference.

Expectations play a big part in each of these conferences. The parents know what is going to occur in each event. Even in the unusual ones, like Ms. Katti's; these parents each referred to the fact that their child had Ms. Katti and her teammate for at least two

years so they knew what to expect. Furthermore, each parent responded that the teachers had kept in frequent contact during the year so that they were pretty much aware of what would be discussed. Mr. and Mrs. Steve explained it by stating, "there were no surprises" (postconference interview).

As I looked at the interaction between Ms. Cooper and her parents, an interesting statement comes to the front. Ms. Cooper indicated that she would not have given information to Mrs. Al if she weren't sure that she would read it. Ms. Cooper said, "You're the kind of parent that, when I hand you material, you will read it."

In this particular conference the parent, Mrs. Al, came with her own agenda written out regarding the needs of attention deficit disorder (ADD) children. She had been reading and felt free to share that information with Ms. Cooper.

When I interviewed Mrs. Al, she said that she and Ms. Cooper had an ongoing conversation about her child and others who had exhibited similar behaviors. Mrs. Al identified her relationship with Ms. Cooper as one of "long time contact," because her parents had known Ms. Cooper during Mrs. Al's childhood. Indeed, the conference seemed to be one of a continuing conversation about shared information.

Perhaps it was a bit unusual for the parent to utilize the larger portion of time within a conference; prior interactions between the two adults would indicate that this was the agreed-upon, expected ratio of interchange. The language of this interchange, however, indicates a level of discomfort or departure from norm since Mrs. Al asked several times for permission to continue or apologized for taking so much of the time, which may indicate that this ratio, although agreed upon, feels different from previous

parent-teacher conference experiences.[6] The potential for a mismatch of views here is

high. The parent and teacher both acknowledged that having the parent guide the larger

portion of the verbal interaction is outside of what is normally done in the parent-teacher

conference. A visual representation of this interaction would look like this.

Figure 11 The Potential Mismatch of Views

Mrs. Al's views are represented with the broken line. Ms. Cooper's views are shown with the solid line.

Legend
General World View (GWV) largest circle
General Teaching and Learning (GTL) second largest circle
School as Institution View (SIV) second smallest circle
Parent Teacher Conference (PTC) smallest circle
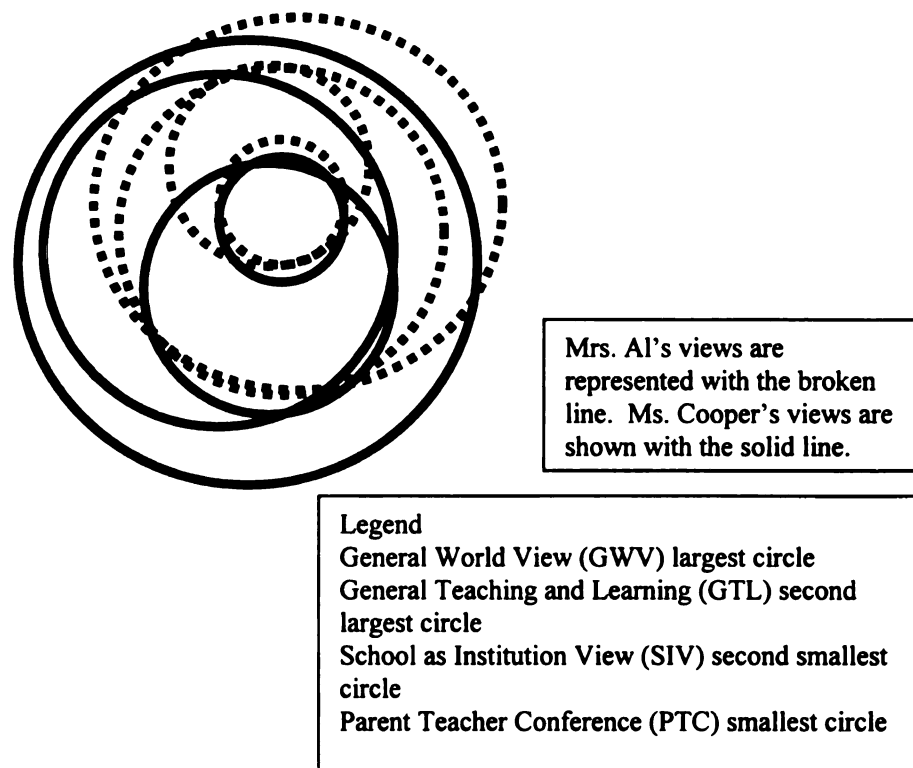
The visual representation shows that Mrs. Al and Ms. Cooper are matched about

as perfectly as you could want during the discussion within this parent-teacher

conference. They seem to have a lot in common in relationship to their general views of

teaching and learning, school as an institution and parent-teacher conference. Mrs. Al

---

[6] Ms. Cooper believes the two conferences I taped of her and the parents were "staged" in that the parents were concerned about what to wear. Ms. Cooper said that these conferences may be atypical due to my presence.

and Ms. Cooper both indicated that they have known each other outside of school for a very long time. This representation also shows that Mrs. Al and Ms. Cooper give a different value to each of the four views. In the General Teaching and Learning view we can see that Mrs. Al does not possess as large a knowledge base as Ms. Cooper. However, this conference clearly shows that both of the participants were working from very similar perspectives.

This brings me back to the issue of expectations. According to Gudykunst (1991) our expectations of people are often built upon how we categorize them. The use of social categories such as Mexican-American, teacher, or friend, often sets up specific implicit expectations of the interaction. Stereotypes of people from groups most similar to us are often easier to accommodate in conversations. But the stereotypes we apply to people from groups that are very dissimilar from our group are much more difficult to manage. As communicators then, we choose to operate at different levels of awareness regarding our expectations and assumptions. These levels have to do with our goals and purposes as well as our stereotypes.

The levels at which we communicate (Howell, 1982) are:

1. Unconscious incompetence where we misinterpret others' behavior, but are not aware of it.

2. Conscious incompetence where we are aware of possible misinterpretation of others' behavior, but we do not do anything about it.

3. Conscious competence where we think about our communication behavior and consciously modify it to improve our effectiveness (referred to as mindfulness).

4. Unconscious competence where we have practiced the skills for effective communication to the extent that we no longer have to think about them to use them effectively.

The level at which we communicate is an indicator of how we may position

(Davies and Harre, 1991) our communication partners and ourselves. In the next section,

I establish the ritual of the conference and my analysis of the language of the conference

for the levels of communication that may have been in operation. We can represent the

levels of communication with Figure 12.

Figure 12 Levels of Communication

MOST	**3. Conscience Competence:** Where effort because knowledge is still being developed. Conscience competence where we think about our communication behavior and consciously modify our efforts to improve effectiveness.	**4. Unconscious competence:** Where we have practiced the skills for effective communication to the extent that we no longer have to think about the skills to use them.
Desire to understand and connect with conversant	**1. Unconscious incompetence:** Where we misinterpret others' behaviors, but are not aware of it.	**2. Conscious incompetence:** Where we are aware that we there is the potential for misinterpretation but we do not do anything about it.

LESS ←――――――――――――――――――――→ MOST

Knowledge about parent, family, and communication skills

Section Two: The Interaction Phases of the Parent-Teacher Conference
Who Gets to Talk, Territorial Prerogatives
(Positioning Within Parent-Teacher Discourse)

Figure 13 Interaction Phases

Greeting	Work of		Invitation	Closing
Seating	Conference		to share	
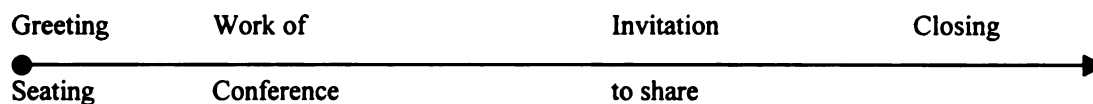
Conference Greeting

The conferences I observed were all held within the child's classroom and

scheduled throughout the afternoon and evening. In Frontier district all the parents were

scheduled into a conference for reporting students' progress in the fall and the spring. As

I experienced the interaction in the hallway on the night of the conferences, it appeared to

be a congenial community gathering. Waiting parents and children used student chairs

and tables placed outside the doors of the rooms until their turns for the appointed

conference times arrived.

Parents moved through the halls greeting each other casually. The children

moved with ease through their well-known environment. I sensed very little tension and

heard an occasional burst of restrained laughter. The walls were a tasteful collage of

student work. Each classroom appeared to have a sampling of the student's work along

with some explanation of the project being viewed. Doors opened and shut at various

intervals indicating movement through the appointments. I exchanged reserved greetings

with the children and parents as they passed by. Outside some classrooms children were

seated, paging through books with looks of resignation while their parents were behind

the closed door discussing the child's progress.

The greetings that could be heard, as parents entered the room, were warm yet had

tones of formality. Even though the words were casual, the movement into the room was

restrained.

From the literature I have reviewed, a set of guidelines is often provided to help

the teacher and parent communicate effectively. These written guidelines for parent-

teacher conferences often provide a "script" by which the participants operate. If this is

the case given the conferences I have studied, is a script evident? Each conference has a

section that begins with the salutation, or greetings. The greeting involves arriving in the

classroom and exchanging comments that are general in nature about the day, the

weather, and so on. Examples of the greetings from each conference follow.

I observed the exchange of greetings before I began the video camera. As I began

to analyze the data, it was evident that each of the teachers, as well as myself, had

somewhat dismissed the ritualistic greeting that moved the conference participants from

the doorway into the room and ended by finding chairs for everyone. In the

postconference interviews the teachers commented on the verbal exchange that took place

immediately prior to the videotaping. I then went back to my notes and the audiotapes to

consider the greeting more closely. This greeting was much like what occurs as people

come together in other social settings; it is an informal acknowledgement of arrival for

the appointed time. One conference began this way.

Ms. Smith   Come on in... and we'll find a place to sit.

Shelly   (inaudible)

Ms. Smith	What she (referring to the researcher) wants a picture of, is what we would look like if she wasn't here. She wants to see, how does she listen to what we're talking about and what kind of things can you tell about them, okay?
Shelly	Show me how to do that.
Ms. Smith	How's she gonna do that? All she's gonna do is listen. Like we do when we're having reader's workshops and writer's workshop conferences, just how when you talk to us all the time. That's what she wants to see is how you talk to us all the time. That's what's important to her, okay? So, let's start and you can see, okay? This is the story we wrote about Shelly, and the pink one is the one that you get to take home this time, and the white one is the one that we'll read to you. And now we're reading the story, we're gonna look through this whole pile at a lot of the things that will help us tell the story about you, okay? Let's start (transcript of conference).

Notice that in this greeting, which begins the conference, the teacher is talking to the student in an explanation. We can assume the teacher believes this explanation to the student is enough information for the parent as she listens in. The language of this beginning is directed toward the child as shown by the use of the pronoun you in conjunction with talk about ways of operating in school. The rhetorical question, "okay?" with no response, is often used to establish agreement or a norm for operating. In this case the teacher used the rhetorical okay as a transition into the next section of the conference.

Note here that the positioning of the parents as receivers of information was established when the teacher addressed the student and then read the information aloud to the student and parent. If one were to just listen to this portion of the transcript it would be quite difficult to discern if a parent were even present during this exchange. The

teacher is the reporter of information and the student is the receiver. The parent is also a receiver, but more by default than by direct acknowledgement.

Another greeting is shown from the transcript of Ms. Smith, Mrs. Mac, and Mac.

Ms. Smith	Hello, come on in, have you met Mrs. Rockafellow?
Mrs. Mac	Yes, we have.
Mac	Yeah.
Ms. Smith	Let's see, if you sit here Mac, like we did with Shelly; that works very nicely.

With this greeting and direction, Mrs. Mac, Mac, Ms. Smith, and Ms. Kay took their places at a round table. Ms. Smith placed her packet of exhibits on the table.

Mrs. Mac and Mac both respond to Ms. Smith in this greeting, giving both individuals a central placement in the conference. Ms. Smith gave direction for the seating due to the need for the video camera to pick up all participants. These directions, which seemed to be out of the norm, were due to the researcher's needs (Ms. Smith, postconference interview). Mrs. Mac and Mac responded to the greeting and introduction of the researcher. This positions both as respondents in this conference.

Conferencing with parents during the spring, for the Sunset district, was by invitation of the teacher or by parent initiation. Not all parents were contacted nor expected to attend the spring parent-teacher conference. In the following two conferences in the Sunset district, the parents have been summoned to school for specific concerns. After an exchange of polite talk and general greetings the "work" of the conference began.

Even though the exchanges that occurred before the work of the conference began received little attention, these interactions hold the potential for implicitly establishing the territory boundaries. One example of this occurred when Ms. Cooper and Mrs. Heidi set the scene, readied the props, and moved to begin work.

Ms. Cooper greeted Mrs. Heidi from the back of the room as she entered through the door at the front. Mrs. Heidi moved toward Ms. Cooper with a casual hello and then Ms. Cooper took her chair.

Ms. Cooper   (While arranging the table and exhibits) Just sit right here Susan (referring to Mrs. Heidi by her first name).

Mrs. Heidi   (Glanced around her) Do you have any tissues? I...

Ms. Cooper   Right there, behind you. Set them right here.

Mrs. Heidi   (Blew her nose, moved back to table, and then began to sit down.)

Ms. Cooper   Would you...
I normally have a box right here on the table I don't think they will be in anyone's way.

(The teacher moved papers over and arranged area for the tissues. Parent continued to blow her nose and get rid of the used tissue. The parent then moved the tissues to the table but didn't place them where the teacher indicated. The teacher reached for them and said in a quiet voice.)

Right here.

Ms. Cooper   Before I start in here with all the papers I have to share with you;

(Teacher looks at her folder of papers while the parent is looking at the bulletin board.)

since I missed the IEPC

Mrs. Heidi   (nodded her head and murmured) ummm

Ms. Cooper   (looked at parent during her response)

	I briefly will go over with you these things and how pleased I am in how well she (Heidi) did and, like we said on the phone, that is exactly what we expected she (Heidi) would do.
Mrs. Heidi	(nods affirmative then gazes off at the bulletin board again)
Ms. Cooper	(continued) and the areas we can still work on.
	(flips through papers; 2 seconds of silence)
	but did you come with any particular questions for me to think about?
	(teacher and parent look at each other-eye contact)
Mrs. Heidi	No. (spoke quietly and shifted in chair)
Ms. Cooper	(smiled) No..because we talk so often on the phone
	(open as though a question)
Mrs. Heidi	Well that/ and, I just (not audible)... so I thought the conference was yesterday... so I wasn't planning to come... I was not prepared...I discovered forty five minutes ago...
Ms. Cooper	it was still on (overlapped) and that it was Wednesday
Mrs. Heidi	I was in the middle of baking bread.
Ms. Cooper	(nodded and smiled) So are you concentrating on how your bread is doing (tones of a question).
Mrs. Heidi	Yeah, I am hoping it is not going... (hand gestures indicated an overflowing motion).
Ms. Cooper	Okay, we will get you home for that. (Teacher takes paper from folder- points to it.) This article is for you and Jack but I see your Heidi as showing dyslexia symptoms.

This greeting provides some very provocative exchanges that may have positioned the participants in quite distinct ways. When Mrs. Heidi arrived Ms. Cooper did not go to the door to meet her, rather she remained at the back of the room and summoned the

parent to join her. The teacher then seated herself first and began to move papers as if she were impatient to begin. The parent needed to ask for a tissue, which is supplied through oral directions, followed by the teacher's directive to place the tissues in a particular place on the conference table. When the parent didn't comply in the exact manner directed, the teacher repeated the instruction "right here" and moved the box to the specific place.

Again, due to the need for clear video viewing the teacher may have been more conscious of where the tissue box was placed and not just asserting her authority in the conference setting. However, the parent could also have perceived the directions given for exact placement as the teacher establishing her territory.

The use of the personal pronouns, "I will go over with you," also establishes the control of the conference with Ms. Cooper. Mrs. Heidi then must acknowledge that she has no questions since she had forgotten the conference time and was feeling somewhat unprepared (Mrs. Heidi's postconference interview). This was not what Ms. Cooper expected to hear as shown in her attempt to complete Mrs. Heidi's statement about why she had no questions.

Ms. Cooper inserted her own interpretation of why Mrs. Heidi had no questions, believing that the frequent interactions the teacher and parent have left no room for additional questions. Instead Mrs. Heidi's explanation of being engaged in other activities and not planning to attend may have reinforced an obligatory feeling and territorial boundaries to this conference.

Ms. Cooper then continued. With a few face-saving moves she could have allowed Mrs. Heidi to feel that her forgetfulness was forgiven. Rather the teacher's use of pronouns again created the potential for placing Mrs. Heidi in a position of receiver of

information and perhaps even the less knowledgeable individual. Certainly Ms. Cooper's

choice of pronouns "your Heidi" for the beginning of conversation about Heidi's

performance assigns responsibility to Mrs. Heidi and her husband.

Ms. Cooper   Okay, we will get you home for that (teacher takes paper from
                    folder- points to it) this article is for you and Jack but I see *your*
                    Heidi as showing dyslexia symptoms.

As Mrs. Heidi and Ms. Cooper began the conference work, the choice of words in

the greeting portion may have established a sense of territory and control that affects the

rest of the conference.

Let's pause here to visualize what the potential match/mismatch between the

parent and teacher may be. Once again I draw the reader's attention to a venn diagram

representing the parent's perspective and the teacher's perspective that underpin this

conversation.

Figure 14 Mismatch of Perspective

Legend
General World View (GWV) largest circle
General Teaching and Learning (GTL) second largest circle
School as Institution View (SIV) second smallest circle
Parent Teacher Conference (PTC) smallest circle

Mrs. Heidi's views are represented with the broken line. Ms. Coopers are shown with the solid line.
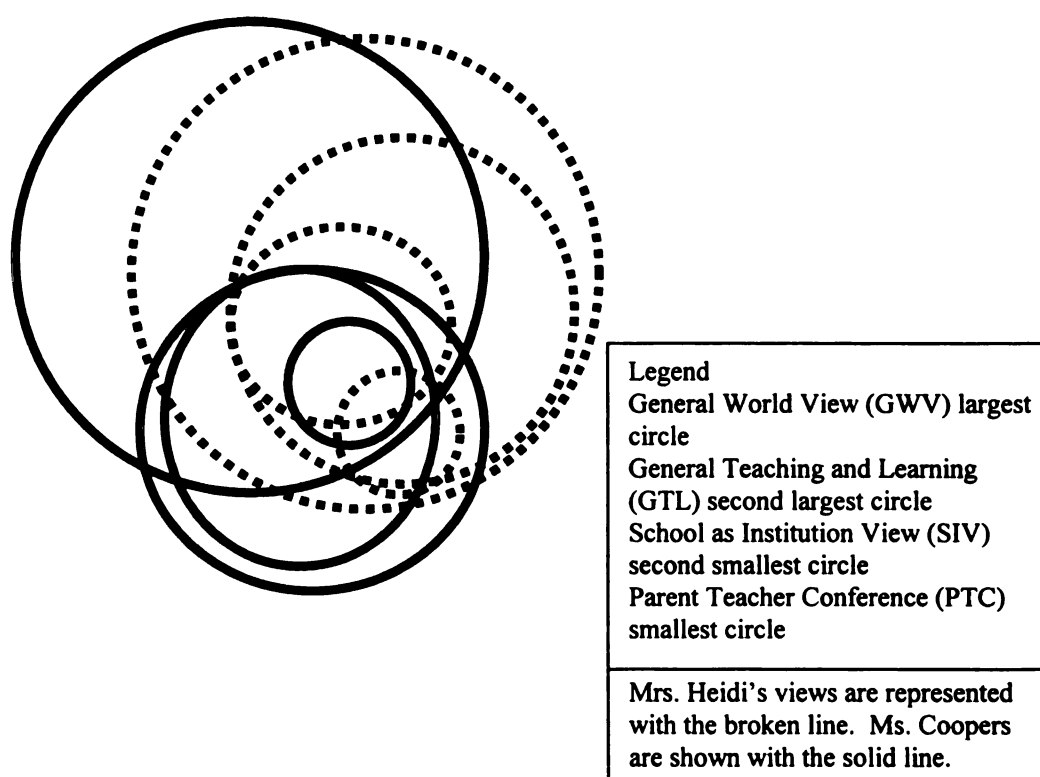
The mismatch of perspectives represented by Mrs. Heidi and Ms. Cooper is quite

salient in this exchange. In Figure 14 above, Mrs. Heidi's view of school as an institution

is presented larger than in Ms. Cooper's view of school as an institution. The general

view of teaching and learning provides the focus for Ms. Cooper. This parent's past

experiences with school have prompted her to pay more attention to the school as an

institution than to learning and teaching information. Mrs. Heidi has experienced the

power of school as an institution and seems to be using those experiences to inform and

guide her word and action choices in this interaction with Ms. Cooper.

Mrs. Heidi reported that she didn't feel as prepared for this conference as she likes

to be. She also was anticipating that the information from this conference would answer

questions that the teacher and she had been discussing for some time (video viewing

interview). While this is similar to the conference of Mrs. Al and Ms. Cooper, in that the

parent and teacher were both anticipating answers to specific questions, the mismatch

appears to occur due to a difference in the school as an institution perspective of the

participants. Ms. Heidi requested the special education assessment to dispel any notion

that Heidi has learning disabilities, while the teacher anticipates the results will confirm

that Heidi is dyslexic (video viewing interviews with Mrs. Heidi and Ms. Cooper). They

both appear to believe that the school, as an institution, can access definitive information

regarding this question. However, Mrs. Heidi understands that the report from the

assessment indicates Heidi is not dyslexic, which then allows Mrs. Heidi to believe that

her theory about sibling interactions and the child's personality explain the academic

struggles.

Ms. Cooper, on the other hand, appears to hang onto her own perception that Heidi is dyslexic and states it in the conference. Mrs. Heidi's response to this mismatch of perspective is to assign the power to the school as an institution and point out that the teachers need to realize that learning difficulties are not totally a result of the child and family. Rather, Mrs. Heidi wants the "school" to realize the difficulty for learning may be in the teaching (postconference video viewing interview). Both participants have the same report and have read this report, yet this mismatch of perspective persists.

Another greeting exchange, one between Ms. Cooper and Mrs. Al, created quite a different feeling for the conference. The following transcript excerpts demonstrate what occurred.

Mrs. Al	Just got to Sandy's teacher, sorry for the late arrival. Which one is the parent seat?
Ms. Cooper	This is the official parent seat.
Mrs. Al	Yesterday Sam would have come. Today he's helping in health class.
Ms. Cooper	Is he great or what!
Mrs. Al	Just look at how organized I am. (She arranged a set of papers in front of her).
Ms. Cooper	I am impressed.

The entire exchange was said with humorous tones.

This conference opening provides several face-saving strategies. Mrs. Al arrives late and quickly acknowledges her tardiness. She also immediately provides the teacher the opportunity to give direction by asking which seat to sit in. This request for direction

positions the teacher as the leader. Ms. Cooper uses humor to accept the parent's apology by identifying a seat as "official."

The next exchange has an apologetic effect as well when Mrs. Al offers an explanation for her husband's absence. Mrs. Cooper provides the acceptance of this excuse by affirming his involvement in school activities. The third set of turn taking continues in this humorous frame as Mrs. Al indicates her preparedness and readiness to begin.

These three exchanges have the effect of explaining and accepting this parent's tardiness, one parent attending, and the parent's information gathering. The possible offense of all three issues is diminished by the parent's immediate apology and recognition of the teacher's position to expect timeliness, attendance, and preparedness. Ms. Cooper uses humorous responses to accept the parent's explanation.

The tone changed when Mrs. Al asked about some work that the substitute teacher had assigned for her child while Mrs. Cooper was out on personal leave. The two then began the work section of the conference.

These chains of utterances alone do not give enough information to form an opinion about the totality of what is going on in these exchanges. However, I think we need to consider what may be one interpretation of this event. I would assert that each participant may be initiating and responding on a somewhat automatic level verbally, yet their language choices were in fact establishing certain interaction boundaries or bridges. If we consider what has been presented regarding the history and ribbons of discourse that each participant brings to the parent-teacher conference, we may be able to shed some light on this event.

Potential Positioning Through the Greeting of the Conference

All the participants indicated that they have had numerous verbal exchanges during the year. Mrs. Heidi has talked with Ms. Cooper regarding Heidi's school performance. Mrs. Heidi stated that she respects and appreciates Ms. Cooper. She has been helpful and a "good teacher." Reference is given to the way in which other teachers in school have classified three of Mrs. Heidi's children. This history of "identifying" Mrs. Heidi's children as special needs children has created a negative feeling about the "school" as indicated by these statements.

Mrs. Heidi   I don't think I have three children that all have special educational needs. Maybe the school needs to realize there is more than one way to teach, the school's way is not suited to all children. It may be more an issue of learning style rather than ability.

Ms. Cooper reported that Mrs. Heidi had difficulty accepting that Heidi is unable to do the work and blamed Heidi's shyness and lack of performance on an older sibling who is derogatory and overbearing with Heidi. Ms. Cooper said that there is a real need for "parenting" information in order to see Heidi's performance improve. Yet during the conference the teacher definitely referred to Heidi's problem as being a disabled learner—even showing signs of dyslexia.

Both participants referred to the IEP testing that was done with Heidi. Mrs. Heidi thinks it supported her contention that Heidi is capable but "insecure." Where we saw Ms. Cooper used language that indicated she recognized that the IEP results showed "just what we thought," that Heidi still is a disabled learner. The use of the pronoun "we" in this statement was an invitation to agree with the teacher's view of Heidi. Mrs. Heidi did

not agree with the teacher and even pointed out that the IEP results show that Heidi's abilities are within a normal range without an indication of learning disabilities.

Perhaps given the history of interaction with the school regarding her children, Mrs. Heidi assigned more importance to the exchange about the placement of the tissue box than Ms. Cooper was aware of. In fact, given Mrs. Heidi's sense of frustration and discomfort over forgetting about the conference day, as demonstrated through Mrs. Heidi's body language and soft tones, we may build an even stronger case for the need for careful consideration of all the language in the parent-teacher conference. Mrs. Heidi, through her use of self-demeaning tones, appears to be requesting acceptance and forgiveness for what she feels is a lack of preparation. Mrs. Cooper, rather than using reassuring words of acceptance, moved on into the work of the conference. Her first statements seemed to set the thesis for this conference, Heidi's dyslexic behaviors and diminished performance.

Mrs. Al, in her interaction with Ms. Cooper, on the other hand, appeared to be very comfortable with Ms. Cooper at the beginning of this conference. She arrived later than the appointment time and offered an apology in a confident manner, which seemed to be readily accepted. The tones of both teacher and parent during this exchange were light, almost jovial. This humor is one way of using language to diminish an offense, in this case, being late. This humor was accepted and extended by Ms. Cooper in that she used the phrase "official" parent seat, in a continuation of the humorous mode.

Mrs. Al continued her explanation by noting that her husband couldn't join in the conference since he had been involved in another school event at the same time. Ms. Cooper showed her acceptance of his absence and continued the humor in her next

statement. The use of this rhetorical statement indicated the two agree on the valuable involvement of Al's father. Notice how the humor was then carried into the parent's next statement, which signaled her readiness and advanced preparation for the conference.

Ms. Smith's conference greetings also served to position the parent and child in particular ways. As Ms. Smith invited Mrs. Shelly to seat herself at the round table, I could only assume that the placement of parent and child in specific seats was for my benefit as the researcher. I am sure Ms. Smith was desirous that I would be able to videotape the conference adequately and wanted all the participants to be viewed. Yet, as the conference continued and Mrs. Shelly and her daughter began the interaction, a similar directive tone was present. Ms. Smith took charge of the interaction, much as a hostess might in her home.

As the conference was starting, after all had found their places, at the conference table, Shelly was staring at the video camera as I was adjusting it for focus. Shelly asked the question, "What is she going to do?" Ms. Smith answered this question immediately, again giving the perception that the responsibility for an explanation was hers. As Ms. Smith tried to explain what was going on, Shelly asked, "What do I have to do?"

At this point, Shelly's mom interjects, "Just act naturally."

Ms. Smith acknowledges Mrs. Shelly's comment by building on her words, "Yeah, just act naturally, as you would in school, when we read and like that."

Ms. Smith then continued with the conference by saying, "let's take a look at all the stuff that we have." By continuing with her "turn" Ms. Smith maintained control of the conference and positioned Mrs. Shelly as the recipient of the information. This tone and take charge approach was consistent with her stated perspective that she is expected

to be the responsible adult in this setting. It is up to her to lead this conference and report information. Mrs. Shelly also indicated that she expected to find out how Shelly was doing in school, which would position her as the receiver of information (preconference interview).

Consider how the interaction during just the greeting demonstrates the potential for creating bridges or barriers to further meaningful talk in these conferences.

Ms. Katti's conference greetings could not be considered in this analysis since I was not present to observe the entire conference and she did not include the taping of the words of greeting. However, she showed an easy rapport as the conferences began by the first words on the videotape. From this section we see how the words of greeting possess the potential to position the participants in particular ways for the further interactions in the parent-teacher conference. Without carefully connecting to various cues and thinking about possible perspectives, the participants can, through their choice of words, establish the potential for satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

The Work of the Conference: Academic Talk

The next segment that appeared in the conference was the academic section. All the exhibits, report cards, and portfolio of work, supported the telling of a story about the student's progress. In fact, two teachers created a narrative story for the conference about the student's progress during the school year. The third teacher used a portfolio of student work to guide her reporting of progress. The students, during the student-led conference, also used their journals and work exhibits to support the information they wanted to give to their parents. During the student-led conferences a HyperCard stack

also helped demonstrate the student's knowledge levels, both in technology and in content material.

Within this segment of the conference I recorded a lot of reported speech. Reported speech are words and activities told through a third party. Bakhtin ([1975], 1981: 338 in Tannen, 1991: 110) said, "Every conversation is full of transmissions and interpretations of other people's words. The act of transforming others' words into one's own discourse is a creative and enlivening one." In the conferences without children present the teacher served as the primary reporter. Parents acted as reporter in some cases, such as Mrs. Al, to varying degrees. Whenever an individual speaker repeats another's speech in a new context it will seldom be done accurately or verbatim. Rather it becomes a reconstructed piece of information with a new and variant interpretation from the original occurrence.

In this, the longest section of the conference, the student's progress was presented in the major categories, reading/writing, mathematics, science/health, and social studies. This interaction was basically a reporting of the student's work and progress utilizing exhibits of student work to support the teacher's explanation. Occasionally a parent gave an extended story frame for the student's performance in school. In both cases, the teacher and parent used reported speech to address the student's words, work, and actions.

In some conferences, if the child was not present, as was the case in Ms. Cooper's conferences, the story was presented through the eyes of the teacher almost exclusively. But in Ms. Smith's conferences, the students were present, yet they seldom initiated their version of an event or performance. Instead, the students, when present, were used more

as actors in scenes that the teacher or parent wanted to create. In this next section I look at each conference for order and effect.

Ms. Cooper

Ms. Cooper's presentation of academic ability and performance appeared to have no written agenda. Rather Ms. Cooper worked from a portfolio of student work that she leafed through as she structured her comments around the exhibits. Ms. Cooper compiled these portfolios in preparation for each student's conference. She noted that these particular conferences were somewhat more difficult due to her five-week absence just prior to the conference event. She had, however, followed her normal preparation of using student work as exhibits. During Ms. Cooper's absence the substitute teacher kept files of student work.

Ms. Smith

Ms. Smith's academic conference section was guided by a carefully written narrative, which she structured prior to the conference. She reported she spent between two to three hours preparing by using each student's anecdotal records, testing results, and journal entries to create a "story" about each child's progress and current performance. She said that in telling this story she was very aware her report was affecting the child and the parent's relationship. She told of her past and present approach to this section of the conference like this.

> When I first conferenced I believed only good things were reported about behavior and learning, I believed I was 100 percent responsible for all that took place in my room so if I reported students were misbehaving then I was not doing my job, etc. NOW I love conference time I wish we had more opportunities to talk. I don't feel so "intimidated" (interview).

Ms. Smith had changed over her years of teaching. She now believed she was more prepared through her anecdotal records and individual testing to answer questions that may come up in the conference. She shared how much of this she does during the year.

> Testing of children keeping anecdotal records and vocabulary lists. A writing and reading interview with each child about how they feel. A cumulative over content and daily work. I recorded daily anecdotal notes of behavior positive and negative so this is looked at for patterns. Then I write a narrative using positive terms as the next step they need to do, but not making it critical; rather goal setting. Overall takes two to three hours per child for preparation. I write two-page narratives on each child (Ms. Smith interview).

Ms. Smith stated that it is her goal to be positive and set goals. Goals for the child are part of her teaching responsibility. She said she feels full responsibility to know what the child needs and how to provide it. Ms. Smith used lots of text to support her decisions, as is the norm for education personnel. She continued in her description of preparation by pointing out that she decided how to develop the "big picture" in relationship to comparisons with other children by determining in what framework to present the student's progress. Ms. Smith appears to be working at the level of communication that was described as conscious competence with her knowledge of the family, the student and content pedagogy.

> I look at all of the writing samples, journals, math notebooks, science etc. So I; the district report card is such a small part of the whole thing. I think about how that individual child is doing with the goals that I have set for each of our units, so the big picture with framework. I work up how, what's out of that the key concepts that I think umm the children should have been learning how to summarize or comparison or whatever. A portfolio of child's selected work and concerns is kept. Each child has their own set of notes and interviews I consider as the narrative is written (interview).

Beyond preparing the information to be shared, Ms. Smith also considered her audience. This was commendable and tied in with what has been said earlier about expectations and assumptions. Ms. Smith noted the importance of considering the previous communication she has had with the parents, as she writes the narrative. She reflects on what has been discussed, what the parents are concerned about, and how to present her knowledge of the student, in relationship to her understanding of the parents.

> But the experiences I have had with parents during the year set some of my agenda. I prepare a plan that allows me to communicate in a way they will best hear it (postconference interview).

As Ms. Smith prepared a plan that allowed her to communicate in a way that the parent will best hear it, she is operating from her interpretations and knowledge of the parents as well as her own goals for the conference. She continued to explain.

> In these conferences I feel I am teaching parents about one third of the conference-modeling teacher in response to child. Child in conference allows this modeling for parents to observe. Messages child received were positive as well as negative. I believe they (child) need to develop a sense of responsibility is why the child should be included in the conference. At times I feel the child appears to be non-existent-if conference time is for adults this part may be boring for the child. If the material is extremely sensitive, then I will handle it earlier with the parent. I have recently gone to a first name basis and more informality with the purpose to affect the home situation (interview).

Ms. Smith had a picture of what she wanted to happen at home based on her beliefs of what was "best" for the child. In her explanation she indicated that it is important for the parents to see how to respond to the child. She intended to model the appropriate expectations parents need to have for the child's responsibility. Ms. Smith further determined what information was sensitive and acceptable communication for the child to hear. Her last point is that she believed that by using the parent's first name it

created an informal atmosphere that is more like the home situation. Her desire is to

remove some of the power differential.

Ms. Katti

Ms. Katti is one member of a team-teacher arrangement for students in grades

three and four. She reflected on how her parent-teacher conferences have evolved across

her years of teaching.

> During my first year of teaching I waited until the parents came into the
> room and then I would give that (the report card) to them, along with back
> then I didn't have narratives but I did do a modification with the report
> cards. So I would explain that and the kids were welcome to come but I
> didn't make it a big deal. If I didn't invite them (the student) explicitly to
> be a part of it. If they came in that was great but with it being explicit over
> the last several years we have more kids coming in (interview).

Ms. Katti's conference time is now structured with the students as leaders; yet, the

academic section still exists. She describes this section as creating the opportunity for the

students to share what they have learned. They take classroom time to self-select what

they would like to share with their parents. Each student then marks, with a sticky note,

the section of a journal or identifies the papers that will support what they want to share.

She believes it is important that the child shares what is important to them.

> I think that the child (wants) to share something they feel really good and
> proud about, that they learned, with their parents. Umm in an interactive
> way and a way to set that up umm which is what we did this year is to
> have the kids pick something that they want to share (interview).

Ms. Katti does not tell each student that they must share any particular piece of work,

yet the conferences that were observed contained a traditional sampling of the subject

areas.

> The child is showing them (parents) some of the things that they've
> learned. I send home my narrative and report card prior to the conference.

The students are explicitly expected to lead the conference now. The students pick something and mark it with a postie stick right where they want to talk about. This helps them move along and time won't be a problem.

But some children started going through his journal from the first day of school. And he started going through it umm just showing his parents in a way that's neat because they can see what this, what it was in the beginning and now this is what he is doing now (video viewing interview).

Ms. Katti said that she writes a two-page narrative on each child. It consumes time because she must go back to their writing samples and their journals and notebooks to gain her information. She uses the information to fill in her framework and then thinks about the goals for each unit and how each individual child is meeting those goals. The parents seem to understand the differences of her classroom and be satisfied with the reporting. She indicated that each conference is planned individually. When a new student enters this multi-age classroom, new parents have asked questions about the lack of ditto sheets and about the way things are done, but seldom does the questioning last long.

Each is individual. We have repeat parents that know what it is and why we are doing things the way we do. We haven't had comments about specific skills in a long while. Occasionally you get that but I can think in math umm the types of problems the kids work on they do with math facts, basic numbers...(interview).

Ms. Katti had already presented her "story" to the parents via written communication before conference time. This sharing time for the student is just that, an opportunity for the students to strut their stuff (postconference interview).

Even though conference structures were somewhat different, the topics covered in this academic section were quite similar. In Ms. Smith and Ms. Katti's conferences, three or four people were present. However, the primary speaker or leader of the conference

was the student in Ms. Katti's conferences. In both Ms. Cooper's and Ms. Smith's conferences the teacher was the primary speaker. The table below (Table 6) helps identify the way the conference structures differ.

Table 6 Conference Primary Speakers

X = Primary Speaker P = Present			
Participants	TEACHER	PARENT	STUDENT
Ms. Cooper	X P	P	
Ms. Smith	X P	P	P
Ms. Katti	P	P	X P

In each of the seven conferences during the academic section, the topics were nearly identical. In Ms. Cooper's conferences I have indicated that the teacher was the primary speaker since both participants indicated that Ms. Cooper had relinquished the right so the parent, Mrs. Al, could share her research. Throughout the conference, Mrs. Al demonstrated that this was not the norm through her repeated requests for permission to continue.

The Closing

Another obvious section of the conference was the closing. Each conference ended with the teacher signaling that it was time for the next appointment, or in some form releasing the parents from the interaction. Each parent took the cue and made the appropriate comments to bring the conference to a close. The following are some samples of such exchanges.

Ms. Cooper   Okay, I'd still like to keep this list. I will share it at staff meeting.

Mrs. Al   Feel free to put it into your own words.

Ms. Cooper	I'll get you that article about dyslexia. I think we've caught it in time. You are the kind of parent when I've handed you material you would read it.

(The teacher is moving away from the conference area.)

Mrs. Al	(Begins to gather her things and move toward the door.)

The conference with Mrs Heidi was closed like this,

Ms.Cooper	I want you to have that copy so, those are a reminder of punctuation and grammar. Now the book report.
Mrs. Heidi	Heidi and I are George Washington fans (in reference to the book report on George Washington).

Both participants looked toward entry area as the next parent entered.

Ms. Cooper	He was a marvelous statesman.
Mrs. Heidi	He really was (overlapped by Ms. Cooper).
Ms. Cooper	Newt Gingrich says... George Washington Biography...
Mrs. Heidi	First in War, First in Peace, First in the Hearts of...

(At this point Ms. Cooper was moving papers and obviously cleaning up the current collection of papers.)

Ms. Cooper	I visited out East, yes, Valley Forge....you would know my historian mom.....

The participants had gotten up from the table and were moving toward the entryway. The conference was over.

In each of these closing segments, the clock or arrival of another parent seemed to dictate the ending time. The teacher was in charge of finishing the interaction.

In Mrs. Mac and Ms. Smith's conference, Ms. Smith indicated that the time was up and they must finish. At that time, Mrs. Mac verbally jumped in with the only question she had initiated during the entire conference. Mrs. Mac's body language

indicated that she had been waiting for her turn to talk and was afraid she had missed her

opportunity. The following excerpt demonstrates what I mean.

Ms. Smith   Oh, I must stop...the time is...

Mrs. Mac   I just want to ask you one quick question.

The conversation immediately preceding this interjection by the parent had the

feel of an informal chat; much like what occurs outside of the schoolroom. Yet, the

urgency in Mrs. Mac's tone indicated that she wanted to ask her question and was

concerned that she might miss the opportunity. All verbal interactions that had taken

place prior to this point had been guided by the teacher's selection of information and

topic. This was the first strong initiation that this parent made. Ms. Smith answered the

question and the parent asked a couple of clarifying questions, then the conference ended.

Summary of the Ritual of Parent-Teacher Conferences

What appears to be the format of the parent-teacher conference? Each conference

must have a greeting, an academic section, and a formal closing, which the teacher

initiates unless the conference is student led. In Ms. Katti's conference I was unable to

discern a formalized closing since she encouraged the parents to continue their viewing of

the student's progress through the use of an electronic format in the media center, which

the student would explain while Ms. Katti began another conference. The closing for

those conferences seemed more like a smooth hand off of the "verbal baton" as she

moved out of the picture and the student continued the "story." We can also see that the

teacher determines when each section of the conference is done and opens the opportunity

for discussion of new or different information.

Since all the participants expected the event to unfold in specific ways, we might have expected to see a sense of satisfaction from the interaction. Let's consider what level of satisfaction was built from the participant's perspective.

During the video-viewing interview after the conference, the parents and student were invited to stop the video at any point where they wanted to explain what was happening or interject further information. By doing this I was able to gain some understanding regarding the level of satisfaction they were feeling. Each parent indicated they had a good conference; however, they would have liked "something" more. I have identified some specific categories that were alluded to within each conference to determine what the elusive something was. The following table shows the topics referred to both during the conference and by the parents during the postconference interview.

Table 7 Topics of Concern for Parent-Teacher Conferences

			Parent's Statements – Postconference Interviews				
Concerns	Heidi	Steve	Rhonda	Al	Mac	Amber	Shelly
Time	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Comfort level	Territory	Acknowledge spelling grade down-justification for acceptance	Elementary junior/high school Ownership of space, time, knowledge and territory	Complete story Clarify	Interject questions clarify		Knowledge of performance
Knowledge	Spelling issue Jewelry Reading Writing Grammar Homework Social Math IEP testing dyslexia	Spelling Spatial visualization Math Reading	Neatness Writing Spelling homework	Writing Homework Social	Science behavior social Books to be read at his level	Math Cursive Science	Computer Math Phonics Sight words
Next Steps-Change	Spelling Tutor Reading	Reading	Neatness	Assign Notebook	Chapter books	Division	Sight words reading home practice

Time

In Table 7, parents show an overwhelming concern about insufficient time. Each

parent wished more time had been available for these interactions, but made a disclaimer

on behalf of the teacher. The parents wanted the researcher to understand that they

(parents) believe the teacher gave them all the time that was possible within the present

structure. It was the parent's perception that someone else set the structure of the

conference and the teacher had very little discretion over how much time each conference

was allowed. Some parents mentioned that taking another parent's time would be

inappropriate. The parents were very conscious that this teacher had many other parents

to talk with.

Territory

The next issue runs somewhat parallel with the issue of time; that is one of

territory. This topic tied in with both teachers' and parents' belief about who is

responsible for decisions. Ms. Smith addressed this idea of responsibility and territory in

this response to my question about the participants knowing their respective

responsibilities.

Ms. Smith	Maybe the parents don't have the same assumption as I have, but I'm assuming that they assume that everything else (except what the teacher has specifically stated that the parent or student is responsible for) is my responsibility.
Rockafellow	Everything else in terms of academics? social? help me unpack everything else. Behavior management?
Ms. Smith	Umm I would think *everything*, attitude, initiative, motivation, academic accomplishment, progress, neatness, manners, all that I don't speak with parents about what I need for them to do, then I am assuming (responsibility for) everything else.

This definition of what "everything else" means is helpful. Consider that this teacher understands that the parents believe teachers are responsible for everything else except what is assigned by the teacher to the parent or student, against what Mrs. Heidi stated about the school being inflexible. Mrs. Heidi believed that the school was inflexible with teaching strategies, rather they assigned student achievement problems to deficient student ability. Is Ms. Smith representative of the teachers' perspective that teachers are assumed responsible for "everything?"

Mrs. Heidi also stated that it is inappropriate to challenge the teacher about a perceived spelling error on her territory. Is this reflective of the politeness code at work, which leaves a sense of dissatisfaction for the parents? Does this give some insight into what may be occurring to create some of the missing "something" that generates a sense of dissatisfaction?

Mr. Rhonda added something to this discovery by identifying the feeling of being on foreign territory when he goes into the junior high school; he felt more comfortable in the elementary building. When I asked him what he thought the school's purpose was in having the parent-teacher conference he responded,

> I would assume that beyond the interaction with the teachers, I believe it is
> to get parents more comfortable in interacting with the entire school. It is
> a funny thing, my daughter is in sixth grade and I push myself over at
> Popover, while it is a natural thing to be able to walk down the halls of an
> elementary school. Parents probably find it more disconcerting to walk
> down the halls of a junior high or high school many of them being
> intimidated themselves. The kids probably have a different set of social
> values and being intimidated by the appearance of parents in reverse, you
> just sort of are chagrinned and I am sure that maybe we, as parents, would
> be better off if we would become as familiar with those elements of our
> children's life as we can become at the elementary level. Maybe we need
> to take school 101 and take it as we come onto campus here and take it
> with us to other levels, causing, I am surmising, that that could be the

beginning of why there could be a gap between growing children and their parents (postconference interview).

This school 101 that Mr. Rhonda mentioned may be what teachers accomplish implicitly by notes and conferences. Explicit instruction regarding policy, academic content, and expectations would be of great benefit for students and families. Having teachers explicitly tell the parents what responsibilities are the student's and the parents would give real boundaries and operating structures.

Another area I probed during the postconference interviews provided some interesting responses. "When leaving this conference I understood the 'next steps' for me as a parent/child" (postconference survey). When parents were asked what the next steps were, they were uncertain that any tasks or "next steps" were explicitly identified. Mrs. Al addressed the question this way.

> I kind of like to have a little bit more time to take your time (the teacher's time) to explain to me, what is going on (postconference interview).

This parent went on to explain that she wants some time to digest what was said and what had been covered so she will know what is expected of her as she leaves. While lots of notes and contact with the parents continue to direct the ways in which parents are to respond and act, a common and connected understanding may be missing.

This scenario reminds me of a home situation in which children are expected to do only as told. The parents control and direct the children in such a way that the child takes little responsibility for anticipating or predicting the next event. Then at totally unexpected intervals the parents say, "You should have known better," when a child has acted inappropriately. The parents are assuming that the child is keeping track of the

pattern that the parent believes exists and has been acting upon, when in fact, each event

has had little connection to the next event in the mind of the child.

Just such misunderstandings may be occurring between the teachers and parents.

The teacher sets the operating rules for the child's classroom during the current year. The

parents, however, soon learn that they will be told what to do, when to do it, what kind of

behaviors are acceptable levels of involvement, and what behaviors are not acceptable by

each teacher, each year. The parent truly feels that the school classroom is the teacher's

territory. The parents in these conferences do not assume that the events of a previous

year are necessarily what constitute the operating system for the new year. But over time,

i.e., four to five years, a familiarity of pattern begins to emerge, parents become more

aware of how to get information and ask the appropriate questions without offending the

teacher or crossing the policy and procedural boundaries. Then, as Mr. Rhonda stated,

the child moves into middle school, where the expectations are different, the operating

framework is different, and he feels like he is in "foreign territory."

Knowledge

Parents mentioned another topic of concern that involved knowledge. In each

conference the parents and teachers talked about content specific knowledge. The parents

addressed several of the issues during the conference, asking the teachers to clarify. The

interactions show that the parents did not necessarily understand what was being

communicated in the same way the teacher understood the information.

One example of such misunderstandings is in regard to the application of spelling

knowledge for Heidi. Mrs. Heidi continued to question why her child was not

transferring her spelling words to work when she writes across the curriculum. Further

misunderstanding around the issues involved in spelling occurred when the teacher apparently had different expectations for parent instruction and drill at home than what occurs at school. Each of these transcript sections appears in this chapter.

Mr. and Mrs. Steve also addressed spelling issues with Ms. Katti. They gave their explanation for acceptance of his lower grade in that subject area. The parents seem to want Ms. Katti to understand that they are consciously transferring some of the responsibility for learning back to Steve and recognize that his performance has gone down from previous marking periods. Implicit in this information, there could also be a message that even though the parents know it is important to the teacher that Steve perform higher on his spelling assessment, they are pleased that Steve is taking more of the responsibility for his own performance. This seems to be an important statement about what the parents value in Steve's learning patterns.

Mrs. Shelly mentioned how she learned to read and what she understands about how Shelly is learning to read. This provides a nice opportunity for both the parent and teacher to come to some understandings about what they are seeing Shelly do as she learns to read. This is valuable information and demonstrates a positive relationship between these two adults in relationship to Shelly's literacy learning. While the opportunity to talk about perspectives of learning to read is useful for the student, it also allows for more understanding to develop between the parent and teacher that improves the level of satisfaction for the conference.

Mr. Rhonda gave an example of a parent's expectation for his child's performance regarding issues of neatness, writing, spelling and homework. This parent perspective appears to be somewhat different than the teacher's perspective. The teacher acts almost

as an ally for the student. Further evidence of this also occurs in the following transcripts.

Additionally, both parents and teachers spoke about the next steps for change. Each teacher believed that they were quite clear regarding what expectations they have for the student's further performance. While the parents also believed they understood what was expected, they were able to itemize or list only a few of the "next steps" as they understood them from the conference time. Teachers were much more confident that they had specifically covered the next steps with the parents and students, yet Ms. Cooper indicated, she was not certain that there would be a carry through for each of the families.

Teachers' Levels of Satisfaction With the Conference

Each teacher stated that the parent-teacher conferences were successful. Ms. Smith indicated that they went very well and she believed each parent left the conference fully aware of the next steps that were expected. Each parent had been informed of how the student was performing and what each student needed to work on. Ms. Smith did note, however, that she was surprised that Mrs. Shelly was so surprised about the good progress Shelly was making. This showed that Ms. Smith had believed, previous to this conference, that Mrs. Shelly knew how well Shelly was doing and that she was making progress appropriate for a first grade student.

Ms. Katti reported that she, too, was pleased with the conference outcomes. Her parents were able to engage in meaningful exchanges with the students and see student knowledge being demonstrated. She was particularly pleased with the computer section of the conference in relationship to new information being demonstrated that parents may not have previously experienced.

Ms. Cooper commented that the parent-teacher conferences went well and served the teacher's purpose.

Ms. Cooper   It works pretty well for teachers. I'm not sure how valuable it is to parents in regard to how well they understand their child. It's a positive effort with the child's needs and highest good in mind. We're going to conference/communicate like we teach and/or parent. We do what we are most comfortable with and do best (interview).

It appears that Ms. Cooper believes teachers and parents have specific ways of communicating in a conference. She also stated that parents and teachers have specific ways of interacting with children that are reflected in the conference. She said that there is a level at which teachers and parents interact that brings a level of comfort but is not necessarily open to change.

Ms. Cooper's statement is similar to what Ms. Smith is stating in the following comment.

Ms. Smith   I mean I am not a parent. (Two-second pause.) I don't have children, I believe that if I had children my attitude would be to go in there (to conference) and I would have an agenda. I think basically parents come in to be reported to. I think basically the majority of parents come in to be the recipient of information. You tell me. They come in and sit down. I have parents tell me that they like the format of my conferences because a lot times they don't say anything. You (two-second pause) basically they come in sit and listen, receive the report then go home and do what they need to do with it (interview Ms. Smith).

When we look at this belief in relationship to the way that Ms. Smith began her conference, I can see the correlation between the parent's lack of initiating topics, their receptive position, and Ms. Smith's overriding belief about the conference.

Another way to consider what is going on in the conference, besides looking at what is said, is to look at what is not being said. The next part covers the effect of silence on the positioning and power differentials in the parent-teacher conference.

Silence Speaks Volumes

Cazden (1988) points out the work of Mary Budd Rowe in researching the changes that the use of silence and wait time can bring in the interaction patterns between teachers and students. Rowe indicates that in teacher-student interactions, increased wait time from the typical one second or less to three to four seconds produces these changes:

1. Teacher's responses exhibit greater flexibility.

2. Teachers ask fewer questions and more of them are cognitively complex.

3. Teachers become more adept at using student responses.

4. Expectations for the performances of certain students seem to improve.

5. Some previously invisible students are no longer restricted to responding to teacher questions and get to practice all four of the moves (i.e., soliciting, responding, reacting and structuring) (Cazden, 1988, p. 60-61).

The speech style of the teacher creates the sense of the language of a lesson. The talk of the lesson has each of the four moves mentioned earlier as well as a rapid pace. It creates the authoritative language that leaves little room for challenge or extension. While a slower speech style allows for more "exploration," as Douglas Barnes (1995) would label it. Perhaps we can connect the slower pace to Bakhtin's idea of "generative language," which offers more invitations to respond and create extensions or transformations of ideas.

One way to determine if the teacher is aware of inviting parents into an active conversation is the "wait-time" used during this "work" section of the conference.

Many of the teachers have expressed their desire to know more about the children and their homes. They want to gain new perspectives from information that the parents and student have to offer during the conference time (see Table 4 to review the purposes for conferences page 138 of this document).

Given these stated intentions, I began to look at the conference for markers that allowed this sharing to occur. One prevalent marker was the way in which teachers used silence. This involved the teacher moving from her "teacher" mode of always telling into a quieter, waiting mode so that the other participants could gain access to the conversational floor.

Ms. Katti used her silence during the student-led conference to assure the students of their lead position. It seemed apparent that the teacher was the focus when parents and students came into the classroom. When Ms. Katti was trying to share the "territory" with the student and give more voice to the student's perspective of progress, she used silence as a powerful tool. In the following excerpt we can see how the teacher encouraged the parents and student to continue to share by remaining quiet for several seconds at a time. In order to gain some understanding of how different this is from another conference (where the teacher fills each second with talk) I will give two vignettes one after the other and then discuss the implications of the "wait-time" in talk. The back slash marks (/) in the following transcripts, each indicate the passing of one second, actual time.

The parents are seated next to each other with Steve being on the end of the line of three. The teacher is across from the father and mother on the opposite side of the table. The Parents have their copy of the report card and narrative that the teacher has

written and sent home before the conference. The father is unfolding the papers as Ms.

Katti begins.

Ms. Katti	Do you have any observations about the report?
Steve	(tapping his fingers on the top of the opposite hand and looking around)
Mrs. Steve	(Speaking slowly and deliberately) He seems to be doing very well, we noticed that his spelling is lower, but we are not concerned about that. He is doing that on his own. (Mom looks at Dad.) We are pleased with his work even though it has gone down. He is working on his own now.
Mr. Steve	Murmurs agreement...nods //
Mrs. Steve	(Looking at Ms. Katti) What are you thinking?
Ms. Katti	(Looking at Steve) How often do you study?
Steve	Once or twice whenever I have free time.
Ms. Katti	And what do you do, when you study them?
Steve	Usually write them.
Ms. Katti	That's a good way to study.
Mrs. Steve	We spend a lot of time with (younger sister) doing it that way. We used to work with Steve like that too.
Ms. Katti	Murmurs...//
Mrs. Steve	So I'm not really concerned. I know he is doing it himself.
Ms. Katti	So... (another space of time)
Mrs. Steve	(Mom looks at Dad, he is nodding his head, Mom has raised eyebrows...waiting) ////
Ms. Katti	So...I think in everything else//he is doing well///// (this is spoken in a soft tentative tone with lots of space).
Mrs. Steve	We're happy////

	So we'll proceed to fifth grade?? (this is said with a smile and a chuckle…as she looks at the teacher) Mom is smiling, Steve is smiling and Dad laughs as teacher also chuckles.
Mrs. Steve	Are you (referring to the teacher) going to take fifth grade next year?! (This is asked in a stronger tone)

At this point the parents and teacher enter into a conversation about the potential changes for the district and the teacher assignments for the following year. The parents are the source of most of the information with the teacher being the less knowledgeable recipient. One major indicator of approval came out of this sidebar in that the parents indicated they are in total support of whatever the staff at the building wants to do regarding the school year's structure. They want to keep the staff that is currently at the school. After this statement Ms. Katti draws the parents back to Steve and the conference purpose.

Ms Katti	(In a strong assertive voice) Steve / …do you have some things you want to show your mom and dad?

Mom looks at Steve; Steve nods vigorously, and moves to another part of the room to retrieve his materials. Silence. Mom waits smiling and makes a comment about getting stuff out.

Dad takes this open space as an opportunity to address some confusion about the report card. He unfolds the papers he has brought and speaks about a word that gave him some difficulty. The word identified is "spatialvisualization." Dad shows it to Ms. Katti. She responds quickly and in a strong tone.

Ms. Katti	I know... spell...(unable to pick up all the words here)
Mr. Steve	(Smiling and looking at Ms. Katti) I know you did but you know what ////?

(Mom and Steve both are looking at paper in front of Ms. Katti and are smiling broadly)

Mr. Steve	The way it reads in this sentence, maybe because now I know what it means it makes a little more sense but /// (Dad's eyes roll toward Mom; she is smiling, moving the papers around that Steve has brought back to the desk. Her eyebrows are raised and has a look of chagrin.)
Mrs. Steve	We felt really b.a.a.d..d like like Steve what does this mean.... We got out the dictionary /// and
Mr. Steve	What I was trying to do was make it one huge word instead of two words spatial visualization and that's what /// (looks at mom again // mom has her eyes on Steve's journal).
Ms. Katti	Yeah, that'd throw you...(said softly again).

The interaction that has taken place here is a nice picture of how silence can give space for parents to address misunderstandings in textual material. This also gives the teacher an opportunity to realize what words are "educational jargon" and may bring confusion to parents. The way in which Mr. Steve brings this to the Ms. Katti's attention utilizes the best of social politeness. He positions himself as the learner. Mom reinforces this in that she said they went to Steve for clarification, hoping he may have used the word in school. When that failed they went to the dictionary and there found that they were trying to understand two words, which appeared to them to be one larger word.

When Mr. Steve brought the word to Ms. Katti's attention, she immediately indicated she knew how to spell the word. Mr. Steve mended the possible offense by assuring the teacher that they were not questioning her spelling ability, rather they were acknowledging their lack of knowledge with the word "spatialvisualization." The silence in this case gave the parents room to alert Ms. Katti to the potential misunderstanding and that they were willing to expand their vocabulary through consulting other people, i.e., Steve and reference books (the dictionary). This use of silence then supported Ms.

Katti's original stated purposes, which were to gain information, allow the students to strut their stuff, and develop rapport with the student's family.

In another one of Ms. Katti's student-led conferences the teacher became even quieter. In Amber's conference the parents work with their third grader to support her report. They provide scaffolding and prompting for clarification, with the teacher making only three or four interjections in response to parent's or student's questions. The sense that I had while viewing Amber's conference was that the student is taking a pleasurable, reminiscent stroll through her work journals, with her parents interjecting their memories of each new area accomplished. Amber addressed some mathematical conjectures she and her classmates worked with. During Amber's explanation to her mother, Mr. Amber made an observation to Ms. Katti.

Mrs. Amber	This looks good, and these are all the various things you do in your math (fades out).

Amber moved pages and pointed to items on the pages in a journal as she gave brief phrases about the things her mom was looking at. Mr. Amber looked at his daughter and mom as they discussed the pages.

Ms. Katti	We have just finished up geometry and are getting into division.

About three seconds pass without anyone speaking.

Mr. Amber	That's got to be about the hardest things to learn for the kids, division, isn't it?
Ms. Katti	Surprisingly no, it isn't
Mr. Amber	Oh, really.
Mrs. Amber	Just use jellybeans (Mrs. Amber jumps in with this statement then returns her attention to Amber's journal).

Ms. Katti	We just put them in groups (here Ms. Katti uses hand motions to indicate separate groups of items on the table).
Mr. Amber	(Nods.)
Amber	Here's how you do a conjecture in mathematical/ that word/that word/ and (Amber is pointing out information in her journal to her mom concurrently with the conversation going on between Mr. Amber and Ms. Katti) is the hardest, all the steps with regrouping.
Ms. Katti	Now when we get to remainders that gets a little confusing when there are no remainders involved kids do (a two second pause and Mr. Amber turns his gaze back to Amber's explanation).
Ms. Katti	It seems subtraction.
Mr. Amber	Oh really.
Ms. Katti	So I don't know (voice fades and her gaze also moves toward Amber and that presentation).

Amber carried the conversation and presentation of her mathematical conjectures for the next forty-five seconds.

Ms. Katti	Basically they had time to think about it by themselves or work with their partner first and come up with some solutions then we talked about it as a whole group and she took notes of what they were talking about and wrote down various conjectures.

Amber continued by showing the various day's work, she named what was done on each day, then got confused about the days and Mr. Amber furnished her with the word Friday.

Mr. Amber	So how are multiplication and division related to each other?

Amber immediately turned back a couple of pages in her journal and pointed to the work done on that day.

This is an example of how even the students accept the idea that an exhibit and text are verification of knowledge and that it is all told in the print. She offered very little

oral explanation and Mom accepted the presentation of text in answer to her question as well. A second question that Mom asked of Amber was, "what is a pentomino?" Amber immediately took an example of a pentomino and began her explanation.

Amber   You know a pentomino, you know how pent, pent means five? (her voice goes up as in forming a question). (Amber then takes out the shapes she has been using in her study of pentominos. She counts the five sides for her mom.)

Mrs. Amber drew Amber's attention to a game she has played with another friend that has a similar knowledge base for shapes. Amber and Mrs. Amber together came up with the name of the game, Tetris. Amber points out how those shapes are not five sided only. Mom has tried to connect Amber's school knowledge with knowledge she has gained outside of school.

Amber also addressed how a volcano works in her science log and dad reminded her that they saw a volcano, kind of, when they were in Florida and they watched it "slime" some people. They also interacted around the process of learning to write in cursive form with some discussion about which letters gave Amber some difficulty at home. The teacher entered into these discussions to get a more clear description of some shared events that occurred outside of school. This was quite a view into how connections can be made between home knowledge and school knowledge within this family.

By using long silences, Ms. Katti was able to gain information about Amber's learning experiences outside of school, the involvement of her parents in Amber's learning, and the connections they tried to make with her school knowledge, including how Amber was able to explain her knowledge to an audience. They gained further

185

insight through Amber's interaction with her parents and teacher. The differences between school, (academic) knowledge and how it is applied outside of school is apparent here.

Hurry, Hurry There Is So Much to Tell

In another set of conferences the lack of wait time and silence creates another atmosphere. As I viewed the next two conferences that I highlight here, the first comment that came to mind was, "Wow, what a lot of stuff was covered, that was dense" (field notes).

Ms. Cooper's conferences had a more traditional conference setting. The parent and the teacher came together, at the request of the teacher, to report on the progress of the student and what further steps need to be taken to assure optimal learning and progress. The teacher used a portfolio of student work to give a general guidance to the conference topics, however, the sequence of the materials was not rigid from conference to conference.

The parents were shown various pieces of work as the teacher reported on what skills were being worked on. First, I need to point out just how many topics are covered in this approximately seven-minute section. It covered reading, self-concept issues, social studies, composition, spelling, grammar, cultural use of language, child's work habits, recess social interactions, mathematics instructional techniques, memorization techniques, and teacher errors in home communication.

I began the presentation of this interaction with Mrs. Heidi making a point about Heidi's motivation and abilities with reading. Ms. Cooper, however, didn't satisfy Mrs.

Heidi by her response, since Mrs. Heidi repeated her assertion that Heidi really loves to read. I have used italics to emphasize Mrs. Heidi's voice as well as the repetition.

Mrs. Heidi   You know she loves to read.

Ms. Cooper   Yes, I know she does.

Mrs. Heidi   She just *loves* to read.

Ms. Cooper   You'd never know she is a child that struggles with reading.

Mrs. Heidi   Because a lot of those that don't read well, don't like to.

> (Parent leans into the table puts elbow on it and looks at the teacher; the teacher is shifting papers again)

Ms. Cooper   (Nods head) Yes that's right, and she likes to write.

With this change of subject, the teacher had dismissed Mrs. Heidi's perspective that Heidi is capable in reading and will get more proficient through being highly motivated. Instead, the only comments that the teacher has left Mrs. Heidi with, is that Heidi is deficient in her reading abilities.

Ms. Cooper   This is *her* biography about Amy and Amy wrote one about Heidi, so I think for parents, if you want to take this along and read what Heidi's biography is...

> (parent is given the paper with story on it and begins to read)

Ms. Cooper   *plus* (teacher points at something at the bottom of the page)

Mrs. Heidi   Great.

Ms. Cooper   Isn't that great. I think that is inspiring her to say, you know, I can really do it, and if Sandy (her sister) is still bugging her, Susan, yea.

                    Are you posting Heidi's good papers? Have...

> (Teacher holds the paper up parent looks over at it and nods. Then teacher and parent are both looking at different samples of work)

Mrs. Heidi   I have more that I need to post now with these two.

Again Mrs. Heidi highlighted the fact that Heidi is doing well. Ms. Cooper had

referred indirectly to her comments about being motivated to read when she pointed out

what is "inspiring her (Heidi) to say you know I can really do it." This brief connection

with the earlier statements by Heidi's mom is lost for a face-saving effect as the teacher

changes topics quickly again. The following section of this exchange seems to once

again position the parent as receptor and powerless. Ms. Cooper gives no explanation as

to why the papers can't be taken home from this conference time. It may be assumed that

Ms. Cooper is concerned that Heidi will want to take her folder home the next day with

papers in it to make it less obvious to the other students that her parent was in for a

conference. We can't be sure and it was certain that Mrs. Heidi was not clear as to why

she was not given the papers that she and Ms. Cooper had viewed.

Ms. Cooper   That's true. This I am saving (teacher moves papers). Now I'm
                     not going to let you take the folder,

Mrs. Heidi   Oh.

Ms. Cooper   You know what I have in here are all the papers that she will
                     normally bring home tomorrow, except for her spelling list

(teacher points to front wall)

                     because I am giving them to the parents I am conferencing with.
                     Her blue folder tomorrow will bring her spelling list but we are
                     getting into book reports in the third grade.

Here Ms. Cooper abruptly changed the subject again. The teacher had moved

from the topic of papers being sent home, to spelling lists, and right on into the topic of

book reports being a part of third grade. Mrs. Heidi, demonstrated her disconnection with the topic switches by using a generic, "okay."

Mrs. Heidi	Okay.

Ms. Cooper   You turned this in last fall and I just keep it in her portfolio. We talked briefly about that (teacher talks to herself as she moves papers around) that's interesting there, all about me.

(Parent begins to read and in whisper seems to read a statement from paper then sort of giggles)

Ms. Cooper   Hmm umm, some parents really have to smile about those, cause they say that is something that my child has not talked about

(teacher talks as she continues to move papers around)

that they enjoyed or thought they were good at

Mrs. Heidi   (inaudible) (Parent points to some written statement from paper.)

Ms. Cooper   Ummhumm.

Mrs. Heidi   I feel best about myself when I help other people.

(Parent turns and smiles at camera [researcher]) Isn't that sweet?

Ms. Cooper   Isn't that true of her?

Mrs. Heidi   Yes, I feel sad when my mom goes to a meeting far away.

Ms. Cooper   Yeah cause you go to Jellystone.

Mrs. Heidi   Umm humm, sposedto.

Ms. Cooper   (Smiles and laughs lightly)

Mrs. Heidi   Umm.

Ms. Cooper   There would be a word to put on her list.

Mrs. Heidi   Sposedto.

Ms. Cooper   Umm, but that's the way we say it sposedto.

Mrs. Heidi	That's, umm because of our society.

(Parent taps her nose and turns to face teacher more directly while pulling at her ear lobe.)

What's his name, uhh, Winston Churchill said we haven't spoken English in the United States in years

Ms. Cooper	That's exactly right, because we create our own.
Mrs. Heidi	Comfoble (overlaps)

Once again the topic went to a major focus this conference had on spelling. Mrs. Heidi had asked a question earlier about Heidi's spelling. The interesting perspective here is that the parent used the opportunity to point out that rules for spelling and spoken English have been misused and abused for years by recalling a quote from Winston Churchill. Ms. Cooper supported her assertion, which in some sense nullifies the extended attention Ms. Cooper gave for spelling accuracy and repetition as a technique to attain that accuracy. Mom has pointed out that again her daughter is not so different in that she can use inventive spelling rather proficiently. The perspective of Mrs. Heidi, once again, was that Heidi is capable as a student. Ms. Cooper has, in an unconscious way, given credence to the parent's perspective and then continues with her own agenda.

Ms. Cooper	Umm humm, (nods) this one there.

(Teacher points to another paper) this is the one the grade that (the substitute.)

Put on and I had said to her, if these are *late* I want them to go down a grade and she had told the kids that. Now I don't know why it was down anyway it was late for Heidi *but*

(Teacher points to paper and parent moves back from table)

Ms. Cooper	This is how I felt her grade was and she is writing so much more.

Mrs. Heidi	Okay (inaudible).
Ms. Cooper	(Overlapped.)
Mrs. Heidi	She gets so frustrated at times that I think she just gives up. I think that is why this was late, I remember her working on this in class, I think she looks around her and feels that everybody else is so much further ahead of where she is.

(Parent uses hand expressions to include the room area)

Ms. Cooper	That is why she won't look back in her book to see the spelling of the words here.
Mrs. Heidi	She/her goal at that moment is she doesn't want…
Ms. Cooper	Is to get it done.
Mrs. Heidi	she doesn't want to lose that much more time.
Ms. Cooper	Recess is important to her. I am so thrilled that she has friends and that she goes out to play and she doesn't say I want to stay in
Mrs. Heidi	Humm.

(Mom looked at nails and appeared to have less engagement here.)

Mrs. Heidi and Ms. Cooper here seem to have broken their line of

communication. Mrs. Heidi was interested in pointing out that her daughter is very

interested in keeping her position with the students, which involves being able to be

finished as soon as the others are finished. Here Mrs. Heidi indicated that it is important

for her daughter's self-concept to be considered a part of "those who can," which means

getting done quickly. Ms. Cooper took this line of thought off into a different direction

and Mrs. Heidi showed by her body language that they have not connected in meaning

here. Mrs. Heidi's show of disinterest in the interpretation that Ms. Cooper gave to the

story was displayed by loss of eye contact and attention to Mrs. Heidi's nails. Mrs. Heidi

indicated that it isn't a matter of going out to play that motivates Heidi, it is her position in the eyes of her classmates regarding her ability to do the work, which is measured by being done quickly (postconference interview).

The next topic concerns changes to math.

Ms. Cooper   Lets see I had a note from (math teacher) lets see you sort those.

Mrs. Heidi   Is it about math?

Ms. Cooper   Math yeah, (both parent and teacher are looking through the papers on the table at this point) these are all from math. See these copying correctly, the problem of the week (teacher is moving through several papers in front of parent). I think Heidi said she likes math.

Mrs. Heidi   Is this it?

Ms. Cooper   Yeah there it is (parent hands paper to teacher who begins to review it orally). ...really putting in a lot of effort, figuring it out on her own...using all numbers 1-9 only once (in audible) without one hitch *she got it* (teacher makes a gesture with her hands to accentuate her success). Now she is on her two's so every day they want her to count by two's you know two, four, six, eight, ten clear up through the twelve's. *Now* to, say to divide and she is teaching touch math (parent is leaning into the table, elbow on table, with her head resting on her upraised hand as she looks at paper). And this makes such sense to say how many twos are in eight and you count by two's. You go two four (for each addition of two the teacher touches one finger on the table) six eight, how many fingers, four (she writes the four on paper).

Another thing she has them do is two, four, six, eight, how many numbers did I use (teacher makes a mark for each multiple of two she says and then counts the marks) but isn't it neat how it works and most kids are really getting it, and it helps them until they get to most people don't go around counting by six's (parent has moved back in chair). It works with three's, four's, and five's but if they are doing this they soon are thinking in those terms that's really all that I am doing is adding.

Mrs. Heidi   Ummhmm (nods and shifts weight in chair looks off into space).

Ms. Cooper	Then it helps them memorize, so you would be amazed on that chart how few of them they have to memorize; seven's and eight's they are not (parent moves way back in chair nods and seems less attentive). Their nines are so easy for them (teacher touches parent's arm). *Heidi* shared about a nine trick. (Parent looks at the teacher.)
Mrs. Heidi	Did she?
Ms. Cooper	Umhhmm so then we added to her nine tricks. *What I am pleased with* she has *no* hesitation; for someone we thought was quite a shy little girl.
Ms. Cooper	So do I. She, she's so fantastic. The more people we have telling her that, the better. So that she knows her successes. So the time beat the clock (during this time teacher is moving papers) (math teacher says) set the timer and have her say her twos, make two fact division problems.
Mrs. Heidi	(Takes paper from teacher and points out something.) Call me. I almost drew a big circle up there and sent that to her.
Ms. Cooper	Call me (overlapped).
Mrs. Heidi	(Sits back in chair and looks at teacher chuckles and brings fingers tips to lips in a gesture of hiding her chuckle.)
Ms. Cooper	She'd smile. She would say, 'thank you.' I say to my parents, 'thank you for being my teacher. Did you catch my letter last week? I left out a word.'
Mrs. Heidi	Yeah. (Parent looks at teacher) if was down at the bottom.
Ms. Cooper	Yeah. It was and you knew what the word was right.
Mrs. Heidi	It was necessary for the flow of the sentence.
Ms. Cooper	Right (nods in agreement).

The pacing of this interaction was much more rapid. Note the lack of wait time

from the teacher. The parent in the previous interaction exhibited very little take-up of

the teacher's talk. The rapid pace in this interaction appears to allow Mrs. Shelly little more than a murmur of assent to the teacher's statements.

The exchange between Ms. Cooper and Mrs. Heidi is an example of what occurs when more authoritative language is used. Authoritative language limits expansion by the listener as Mrs. Heidi demonstrated when she exhibited a lack of interest in what Ms. Cooper stated. Also, Ms. Cooper, in using teacher talk, was less sensitive to these prosodic cues from Mrs. Heidi. Generally teachers who believe that the parent-teacher conference is a time to report about the student's progress tend to use more authoritative language.

A second example of this rapid pace is in Ms. Smith's conference as well. The pattern within the interactions also feels much like the soliciting, responding, and reacting pattern of classroom teacher talk (Cazden 1988).

This style of interaction once again seemed to be linked to the expectations and assumptions that the teachers have as they enter into the parent-teacher preparation. Ms. Cooper's conference behavior seems to be reflective of the idea that Ms. Smith has put forth that the conference is her (the teacher's) responsibility to conduct. The goal, directed pacing, and choice of language during the conference appears to be a result of the teacher's focus on reporting. The teacher must meet the perceived expectation of the district in relationship to reporting information and progress. The teacher knows where the conference has to go and sets about to accomplish a predetermined agenda. Even though the teachers have indicated that they desire to establish the agenda for the conference jointly with the parents they often act in the conference in ways that minimize consideration of the parent's agenda or goals.

Although Ms. Smith did seem to be slowing her rush through her report at times, as shown by the following interaction with Mrs. Shelly, Ms. Smith took the time to clarify an understanding of Shelly's current progress in developing reading strategies, i.e., sight vocabulary memorization and sounding out words.

> And we're gonna keep this one, and the next part of the story says: 'She enjoys reading at school and she reads beginning reader books with good fluency and expression.' Do you know what that means?

At this point in the conference Ms. Smith changed the third person pronoun and spoke directly to Ashley, not the parent. She invited Ashley to think about what was just said and paraphrase it for her Mom and Ms. Smith. Ashley however did not give a paraphrase, rather just a shake of her head.

> That means that when you read, your voice is very interesting. Um, ah, if people are talking in the story, you make it sound like they're really talking; it means you make your voice really interesting and you read real smoothly.

Again a shift of pronouns here indicates that Ms. Smith had moved back to the reading of the printed narrative. Mrs. Shelly and Ms. Smith had very little eye contact during this exchange. In fact, Mom seemed to not be an active part of this exchange cycle, rather she appeared to be a sideline observer.

This is reflective of Ms. Smith's desire to model the interaction between teacher and student. Ms. Smith said she believes she is teaching parents during her conferences. We can see here how Shelly is one of the actors on stage for Ms. Smith in these exchanges. This type of exchange continues today.

> She relies mainly on sight vocabulary and context clues. Her next step will be to sound out words as she reads. With consistent daily practice, she should be able to develop this ability. What that means is, when you are learning new words.

Again at this point in the narrative Ms. Smith changed her pronouns to indicate

she had stopped reading and addressed her comments to Ashley. In the next sentence

though Ms. Smith had eye contact with Mrs. Shelly and addressed her comments to mom.

> These are all; these are all the sight vocabulary words that Ashley has
> learned already. That's the first page and she's already started working on
> some of the words on the second page.

> Mrs. Shelly responded with a nod of her head and Ms. Smith continued by turning

to Shelly with further explanation.

> And, ah, I think what pretty much you do, Shelly, is that you pretty much,
> just remember what the word looks like. You really don't sound them out
> very much because you're good at just remembering what a word looks
> like. Remember at the beginning of the year when we would ah learn a
> new word we'd draw a box around it like this? // To help us see what
> shape the word was? Remember when we did that?

> At this point Mrs. Shelly looked at the intern and murmured, "Oh, that is what she

was doing!"

> Oh do you do that at home sometimes? Okay, and that shows you the
> shape this one just has a box like this, this box goes up, up down, like that.
> And that's a lot of what sight vocabulary is just memorizing the whole
> word.

> Ms. Smith acknowledged Mom's side comment indirectly by continuing to

address her first comments to Shelly and then changed the pronoun used to indicate that

she was addressing her comments to Mrs. Shelly. Mrs. Shelly looked at her daughter

while Ms. Smith continued her explanation.

> Um, she seems to be quite good at that and she relies on this, more than
> sounding out words. And, you wanna read that one?

Two seconds of wait-time passed.

Shelly   I forgot it.

Ms. Smith	Ummm, I bet you can read it if we do some of these.
Shelly	Yellow, green, blue, purple, // white, black, brown, gray, pink, red, orange.
Ms. Smith	You read it. (laughter) So, and, um.
Shelly	Light, frog.

Mrs. Shelly took the opportunity, presented by Ms. Smith's laughter, to interject her observations about Shelly's reading skills.

Mrs. Shelly	She's been picking out words everywhere.
Ms. Smith	Do you want to go get a book that you can read?
Shelly	Oh!
Mrs. Shelly	She's been really amazing me lately with the reading. Like she'll say, 'well I want you to read tonight,' then she'll go want, bear, with, you know, just anything. Like ah, la, la, la, you know just trying to sound it.

Ms. Smith picked up on Mrs. Shelly's reading interaction with Shelly at home.

She acknowledged that Mrs. Shelly is doing a great thing by helping Shelly read at home.

Ms. Smith also talked about the value of reading for different purposes at home. This is

an acknowledgement of the parent's efforts to sound out words with Shelly but, as we

will see, there is a difference of opinion about what strategies Shelly needs to be using as

she reads.

Ms. Smith	I really like your idea as parents, um, to about, um having her home reading program be a time where she would actually, she would do the practice, she would focus, she would sound out words, and then have another, and so she'll just pick out words then but. Most of her books at home are pretty much her level right now or a little higher.
Ms. Smith	Okay (speaking to Shelly as she returns with a book).

Shelly	Feet, by Joy Kelly. Feet jumped. Feet hop. Feet walk. Feet sat. Feet (unclear). I'll go running, running, running, down the street.
Ms. Smith	Great! Great! Now I'm gonna ask you some questions. On this page, you got everything right. You read feet jump. Then you started to say feet run, but you changed it. You changed it to hop. Um how did you know that that did not say run?
Shelly	Cause it didn't start with an R.
Ms. Smith	Oh okay. Then how did you know that it did say hop?
Shelly	Because. I figured out it; because sometimes I don't see it right.
Ms. Smith	Mmhm. Um, / okay. But then you did know that the word said 'hop.'
Shelly	Cause um, cause sometimes I make other words into other words.
Ms. Smith	Okay, I didn't tell you that said 'hop,' your mom didn't tell you that said hop, you figured that out yourself. Do you know how you figured it out? Okay. Do you know what your brain did? What?
Shelly	It helps me ta; it helps me ta think.
Ms. Smith	Okay. It helps you to think. Then on this word, ah you read all of those, right. Then you said feet and then you really were thinking very hard for a long time, and then you said meet and that was right. How did you know that said meet?
Shelly	/// Ah I thought it?
Ms. Smith	Mmm. You thought it? Do you know what helped you to think it? Cause you were right. / Okay. Um, I think. I think one of the things you do, Shelly, is that you are very good at remembering words. I think that's why you have so many words. I think that you just remember that 'c' and 'a' and 'n' always say can. Okay? But how do you remember?
Shelly	Because; it, I don't remember, I just think it.
Ms. Smith	Mmm. That sounds to me like sight vocabulary memorization.
Mrs. Shelly	Yeah, I wish I had that.

Ms. Smith	And that is a way that a lot of kids approach reading, that they rely on sight...
Mrs. Shelly	I don't remember this when I was that age. I remember really struggling trying to sound it out.
Ms. Smith	Well, there's different approaches to learning reading and some kids rely more on sight vocabulary memorization, we have more, we have other kids in here too that approach new words with memorization. And that's a very, um, valid, a very good skill to have. Another skill, that, that also supports that and is real helpful is being able to sound out words. Some kids will sound out words but they never really get so that they memorize those sight vocabulary real well. So you know ah, they, they start it, kind of ah, ah, from a different approach. And they'll sound out all their words but aren't good at really memorizing those words as well. Ah, when kids have both those skills, um they're gonna have a lot stronger approach to their reading.
Mrs. Shelly	Recently she's been more into trying to sound out the words.
Ms. Smith	Yeah. See, uhhuh, uhhuh.
Mrs. Shelly	You know what is this it's easier to ask mom but more often lately she's gonna ask, er, been really looking and trying.

At this point Mrs. Shelly and Ms. Smith have had a rather long direct exchange regarding literacy learning. This seemed to be a genuine interaction in which both gained information about Shelly's learning and performance. Mom learned about a sight-word approach and also shared her insights about how Shelly is trying to apply her letter-sound knowledge to new words at home during shared reading time. During this exchange, Ms. Smith used a generative style of language that allowed for Mrs. Shelly's interpretation of what Shelly was doing as well as opening up Mrs. Shelly to the skills that Shelly is using with sight words and configuration cues.

Ms. Smith	Uh huh. Your mom and I are both saying the same thing about what we're noticing about your reading is you dong two things to teach yourself how to read, Shelly. One thing you're doing,

is your just thinking it. Your brain just tells you what the word is. But sometimes, when you're, when you're, when you're looking at a new word, that your brain never saw before, you're still guessing it and that's because you're sounding out the word. I was listening to you and you kind of went mmmmmmmmmmmmmmeeeeeeeeettt, mmmeet, meet, meet, feet meet. So you sounded out your word, and that's, that's um, that's a really important thing to do when your reading and your mom says that she sees you do that more. That you're starting to do that more at home too. And that's helping you to be a better reader. To sound out words, to remember, just think some of them and to sound some of them out.

Mrs. Shelly   Something else she's doing too that I've noticed is ah, um we have this little thing, I don't know it's a game or something and it has like hat, hand, you know like different words and then you change either the first letter or the second letter. Everytime, she doesn't even have to think, she just you know, I mean they were easy words but, I was like amazed because I don't remember that kind of comprehension at first grade.

Ms. Smith   Uh huh, well I think that this is relatively new with her starting to sound words out, because even when I was doing the testing quite recently, I was still seeing a lot more of the sight vocabulary and that's kind of what my story was about you, Shelly. As it (the narrative) said, she relies mainly on sight vocabulary context clues. Her next step will be to sound out words as she reads. With consistent daily practice she should be able to easily develop this ability. Um, I think one of the reasons that your learning to read so good is because you take your home reading program home, and you practice it and every time you practice at home, you're getting a little bit better. So when you practice at school and you practice at home, your getting a lot better. That's a very good idea to do that. The next part of your story says: 'her continuing practice at home will make a significant difference.' And if you keep doing the same things, you are going to keep getting a lot better.

Ms. Smith took the time to address Mrs. Shelly's perspective of Shelly's reading strategies. She tried to have Shelly demonstrate her strategies by having her read a book to them. Then as the discussion continued Ms. Smith helped Shelly and her mom think

about Shelly's thinking while reading. This strategy allowed for Mom, Shelly, and Ms. Smith to come together in their understandings of what is happening for Shelly when she reads. This is an example of the teacher adjusting her agenda to the questions and perspective of the parent and student. This type of interaction allows for an intersubjectivity to be developed around the topic of reading strategies. The parent, teacher, and student all finish this part of the exchange with new information about what is occurring during Shelly's reading.

This exchange is also a great example of what is meant by generative language. This exchange of information is loaded with opportunities for clarification and opposing views. At the change point the teacher indicated it was time to move to a new subject— after a summation of the previous information is given that validated the new information for all the participants.

The Artifacts Used in Conferences

Mehan (1986) shows how those with more authority during an education conversation are difficult to interrupt and often refer to "concrete" evidence to reinforce their view of a child. These concrete pieces of evidence are usually test results or selected pieces of another author or even student work. Taylor (1991) also gives a vivid picture of how the parents' voice is seldom given much credibility. This approach to reporting has a weight and strength that tends to silence any opposing views.

As I looked at the parent-teacher conferences I saw the same validity being assigned to "artifacts" that the teacher and, in one case, the parent brought into the conference. The students use the "evidence" of their journals to validate the story they want to share with their parents. Once again this reliance on "concrete" evidence, the

written format, gained either from the student performing, or another author in test format or books, extends the idea that language in written form can be static and show a singular specific picture or way of being outside of the context.

Opposing views can result even when the teacher and the parent consider the same artifact. An example of this was Heidi's spelling. Heidi's mom has been shown a list of personal words that Heidi misspelled in her writing work. Mrs. Heidi then looks at an exhibit of Heidi's work and pointed out how large a vocabulary Heidi has and what words she attempted to spell. The difficulty level of the attempted words seems to be the issue for Mrs. Heidi. Ms. Cooper acknowledged that Heidi doesn't let her lack of spelling ability keep her from using interesting and creative language in her writing attempts. Mrs. Heidi also drew Ms. Cooper's attention to the fact that the papers that Heidi has been bringing home would indicate an improvement in work, while Ms. Cooper has been using Heidi's work to validate Heidi's inabilities.

Mrs. Heidi	Tell me about spelling (parent looks up toward ceiling pauses).
Ms. Cooper	Um hmm.
Mrs. Heidi	We can work with her on her spelling list and she does wonderfully on her spelling test, but in her work (two sec pause) it is completely gone. How do you get her?
Ms. Cooper	...make that connection (teacher supplies words overlap).
Mrs. Heidi:	Yeah, what's causing it and how do you get her to overcome it. Mrs. Beasly, the substitute teacher, said that something that Heidi would do that drove her kind of nuts, was that she would be writing something for a paper for the teacher, she would have the words right in front of her in the book she just spells them out of her mind. She doesn't look she just writes.
Ms. Cooper	Hhhm (nods) less than one second pause) I think that part of that is, wanting to get it done. I think at the moment she thinks

that she is right. It sounds right to her. She needs to take the time to go back and look at it again and compare it a..n..d very often that is the school's fault. We say okay you have ten minutes to finish this and hand it in; that doesn't allow them the time to do a first draft. I think Heidi should always do at least three drafts to make sure her spelling is done. Then if she is copying out of her book and then if what I say to the kids is touch if we're spelling results, touch 'r' touch 'e' touch s touch 'u' touch 'l' touch 't' they have to. Especially a student like Heidi has to. They have to touch it. Okay that is an 'r.' I think in her head she thinks that is right and that is the way dyslexic children see words.

Notice how Ms. Cooper brought the diagnosis of dyslexia into the answer she gives to Mrs. Heidi. Each time Ms. Cooper pointed out her opinion, that Heidi is dyslexic, Mrs. Heidi gave a very non-committal response as is shown next. This lack of take up would indicate that the parent doesn't share the teacher's opinion.

Mrs. Heidi	Um hmmm.
Ms. Cooper	So, you're asking me what is the remedy for that; how do we help that? For these kids it is repetition, repetition, and using it in different sentences. Begin by always writing her spelling list (teacher is searching for a paper on table top). I thought I had my pink sheets for the week. (Teacher looks around at counter etc. Parent looks under the table and gets up to retrieve them.) Oh yeah there they are/ yes you're much younger than I am.
Mrs. Heidi	Yeah.
Ms. Cooper	Anyway, these are her personal words for the week. You have them home on a green sheet that means she had misspelled these in her writing. Now this means she needs to absolutely every time she studies not only say them orally to you, not just write them down, cause if you said friend she studied it; she could remember it. What she needs now, after you get through the whole list she not only writes them down but she writes them in a sentence. I love my kitten

(Parent has moved back from table and is clearing her throat-no visual eye contact.)

	May I have a cookie, she can add endings too and then check that and say, 'now Heidi look you go down through the lines,' and she has to find the mistake where you say. 'Heidi I can find one mistake in line one see if you can find it circle when you think you have it.'
Mrs. Heidi	Okay (looking off in the distance)
Ms. Cooper	Now she can, again this is a kind of spelling test: Can I spot a misspelled word? And if she knows that there is only one, the chances are that she can find it. That is the word that she has to write five times. She has to put it in another sentence.
Mrs. Heidi	Um hhmm (parents rubs her temple and remains back in chair from teacher.
Mrs. Cooper	That's how we build in memory. That's really what personal words are about is what words are the kids missing over and over again and there are certain words that are not phonetic. We call them red words. They just have to memorize them. Another thing you can do for her is she can spell the word friend; a lot of third graders still mix that up the 'i' and 'e.'

Mrs. Heidi at this point seemed to have reached her tolerance of the instructional directions the teacher has given. She interrupted and explained a strategy for spelling that she has used to help Heidi. It seems that Mrs. Heidi was not getting her original question answered regarding how to help Heidi use conventional spelling in her creative writing. The issue of making her practice what looked like school instruction was not what Mrs. Heidi had in mind. The two perspectives were not meeting here. Notice in this next section how the parent drew the teacher to the words that Heidi is making mistakes on and pointing out subtly that the "i" and "e" mix-up was not present.

Mrs. Heidi	(Interrupts) I told her about 'fri' her 'end.'
Ms. Cooper:	Frying her ends, umm humm. That is a neat technique because she knows the word end and 'fry' she can hear the 'f r i.'
Mrs. Heidi	Is it there on her... get to pick out their own words.

Ms. Cooper	They are words they have missed in their writing.
Mrs. Heidi	She used to write (unintelligible). She enjoys it.
Ms. Cooper	You know its the personal list?

(Parent leans forward and motions toward the pink paper that the teacher has.)

Ms. Cooper	It should be; here these on top.
Mrs. Heidi	She...(in audible) do they challenge?
Mrs. Heidi	It's the challenge.
Ms. Cooper	I think she was on super spellers; was she not?

(Teacher looks toward bulletin board for name on chart.)

Mrs. Heidi	She was on it twice in February.
Ms. Cooper	See she is more motivated to do it.
Mrs. Heidi	Friend is not on here.
Ms. Cooper	But this an 'e' in there and a capital 's' (teacher points out errors on pink paper).
	But one thing about Heidi that is so neat about her is that in creative writing she doesn't feel limited by her spelling/limitations she will use words that come to her creatively that's why (teachers tone is stronger as though she is moving into further explanation).

Mrs. Heidi has tried through this part of the exchange to point out that Heidi has shown some strength in the spelling of the assigned words. The parent's spelling strategy has helped Heidi since the word friend was not on her personal spelling list. She seemed to also want the teacher to attend to the original issue of writing spontaneously and how to apply the knowledge Heidi was gaining from the weekly spelling assignments. At this point the parent drew the teacher's attention to a word that had been marked incorrect.

The interruption here seems to indicate that the parent is questioning how the teacher approaches spelling.

Mrs. Heidi   Is this the way?

Ms. Cooper   Um hmm it is, now jewelry (tone continues as though this word would have been a part of the first explanation before teacher pointed it out).

Mrs. Heidi   You would have thought I would know how to spell that.

Ms. Cooper   Now these are words that, yes, (laughs) why don't you know that (continues to chuckle -hand moves out and touches parents arm in a nudge as she speaks chidingly). I think there is two ways to spell jewelry

Mrs. Heidi   I would have spelled it jewelry, well maybe.

Ms. Cooper   For a lady who sells jewelry.

Mrs. Heidi   I wonder if the company I work for knows how to spell jewelry.

                    (Looks at the camera and makes a face) maybe the company I work for spells it wrong.

Ms. Cooper   This would be the preferred spelling.

Mrs. Heidi   Okay.

Ms. Cooper   But I have seen it both ways. These are all words that they used in their writing. For a bonus I let them choose a country or a state so they challenge themselves. Copyright is a word that we learned about but how these came on her list she said she didn't remember them and they reappeared and it was misspelled or if it is a word that she couldn't spell during writing when they are writing in their journal and they came to me and I had to write it in the back. It became a personal word

Each of these attempts to develop a counter perspective as to Heidi's abilities is interesting in itself, but as we think of what is occurring here regarding the relational issues, it expands the potential for what the language is producing even further.

When each of these verbal and exhibit exchanges and challenges are considered in relationship to the statements each participant made regarding the knowledge and decisions each individual is making we can begin to understand what "sense" is being generated for each.

Because of the subtleness of the challenges Mrs. Heidi initiated, perhaps Ms. Cooper was unaware of Mrs. Heidi's challenge. However, Ms. Cooper's response to each challenge appeared designed to reinforce Ms. Cooper's perspective that Heidi is a child with learning problems. This continued focus on Heidi's deficits was a frustration to Mrs. Heidi as indicated by her repeated efforts to highlight Heidi's learning strengths and the discrepancies present in the artifacts used by the teacher.

Further dissatisfaction grew when Mrs. Heidi did not receive a clear explanation regarding lack of transferred learning between Heidi's improved spelling test and persistent errors when engaged in free writing.

Ms. Heidi appeared disengaged in the conference interaction. Ms. Cooper chose to explain this disengagement as a lack of parent knowledge.

Ms. Cooper commented on the need for furthering the knowledge about parenting that these families have. She further indicated that she isn't sure the conference as it was experienced was beneficial to the parents.

> It works pretty well for teachers, I'm not sure how valuable it is to parents
> in regard to how well they understand their child. It's a positive effort
> with the child's needs and highest good in mind. We're going to
> conference/communicate like we teacher and/or parent. We do what we
> are most comfortable with and do best (interview with Ms. Cooper).

When Ms. Cooper wrote her postconference comments and we talked, she had several interesting observations to make regarding this family and her relationship with them.

Ms. Cooper indicated that she believed that Mrs. Heidi did want her to understand Heidi more intimately. Ms. Cooper believed she gave Mrs. Heidi specific remedial helps for spelling. She gave her new ideas for studying spelling. She said that the parents felt comfortable with her and are very open. Yet, she had mixed emotions about how "valuable" the materials she gave them are in terms of doing anything differently immediately, she says, "I doubt it." Yet she reports that both parents have been making changes all year.

Ms. Cooper stated that parents know their children really well, but found it interesting that Mrs. Heidi is "holding an older child responsible for the third grader's shyness." Ms. Cooper further reported that there was not much in these conferences that hadn't already been discussed earlier in the year. There were no surprises.

Ms. Cooper indicated that both of her students (Al and Heidi) have been thoroughly tested as a result of her efforts this year. Her comments about Heidi indicate that new knowledge has been gained through the IEP testing, "as a result we are now more aware there is not a learning disability." According to Ms. Cooper both (parents) feel free to consult other resources and both families realize they have changes to make at home.

We can see by the comments Ms. Cooper made after the conferences that there appear to be some conflicts in the messages she has sent. During the conference with Mrs. Heidi, I would have concluded that Ms. Cooper believed that Heidi has a learning

disability, specifically dyslexia. Yet after the conference in her interview she indicates that no learning disability exists. This type of mixed message must be confusing for the parent.

Mrs. Heidi, in her interview with me after the conference, stated she did not believe that there was any learning disability for Heidi. She referred to the testing as her idea and that it did in fact show that Heidi just has a different style of learning. She also believes that the problems her children experience in school have more to do with the school's refusal to recognize the different learning styles of children. The mixed messages that Mrs. Heidi has received, the IEP and the teacher's reference to dyslexia, served to confirm her discontent with the school.

Summary

In this chapter I have shown that the assumptions and expectations of the participants do affect the choice of words and how language is used in the parent-teacher conference. I have demonstrated that language can be categorized into authoritative and relational words. I have given examples of how relational words through generative language can create an intersubjectivity that enlightens all the participants. I have further shown how the use of teacher talk and authoritative language can stifle understanding and promote discontent between participants. I have shown that the use of silence can be useful for gaining additional insights for the student, parent and teacher in the conference.

In the final chapter of this study I discuss what new understandings can be gained from this new information about the parent-teacher conference. Since research such as this opens up additional avenues of study in the field of discourse analysis, I offer ways that research may be furthered. I also look at the use of this information for teacher

educators in creating new and different learning opportunities. The last area that I

consider has to do with the use of the information to create new ways of listening and

interacting with parents and students in the parent-teacher conference.

CHAPTER 6

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to consider the findings of this study and then explore the implications for research and instruction. In the first section, I examine the findings from these parent-teacher conferences that directly answer the questions at the beginning of this document posed in my methodology chapter. The second section of this chapter covers the four views that have permeated the data gathered in this study. These views focus the attention to the question of prior knowledge and how it connects to the words and actions as seen in these parent teacher conferences. The participants' satisfaction level is represented and considered in relationship to the potential for match or mismatch between parents and teachers. The third section of this chapter will address the implications that this study has for preservice education and professional development programs. In the last section I will identify the enduring questions that remain to be answered through further research.

Findings

The study of these seven parent-teacher conference experiences provided valuable findings. I began this study with four questions and have generated answers for each of them. The following text gives a succinct answer to each question and the following text provides additional discussion of the questions and answers.

What does the discourse of the parent-teacher conference look like? Regardless of the parent-teacher-student participant configuration, the form of the conference was quite traditional. The greeting, work of the conference, and the closing are reflective of

societal norms for social interaction. This sameness generally created a sense of ritual. This ritual generated an expressed level of comfort for all participants in the conference.

However, as I analyzed the discourse of the conference, the form of the conference veiled the multiplicity of possible messages exchanged. By encouraging the participants to reflect on their prior experiences and through the consideration of their discourse histories I was able to identify many potential matches and mismatches of perspective that provide several possible explanations for the varying levels of satisfaction during the conference.

The teachers believed that they hold conferences in much the same way as they teach. I addressed this belief through the use of the nesting perspectives figure, which included the world view, general teaching and learning view, school as institution view, and parent-teacher conference view. The overall effect of the conference for the teacher was reflective of each teacher's overarching world view and evolving teaching and learning views. This evolution was evident as the teachers expressed their purposes for the conferences and the mismatch of discourse and behaviors that were generated through the language choices they made.

The parents were less able to provide reflective statements about their role in the conference. While the parent discourse in the conference appeared to fall well within the norm for casual communication in our society, it failed to provide the information and assurance needed to support the teacher's stated purposes of gathering information about the student's home and generating a confidence that the parents will follow through and work with the students. Ms. Cooper provided the most explicit example of this attitude when she expressed doubt that the conference works for the parents. The parents offered

explanations and excuses for their continued concerns about helping the student achieve. The parents also indicated that their own lack of understanding for specific academic knowledge limited their ability to help their child. They were not confident that they knew the next steps for helping their child.

What are the effects of the teacher's language choices on the parent-teacher conference? This question drew me into an analysis of the function of discourse during the conference. I found that the teachers often move into a default mode when interacting with parents in the conference setting. Ms. Smith indicated that she intends to take about two thirds of the parent-teacher conference time to teach the parents. She uses the presence of the student to role-play and model appropriate instructional interactions. Ms. Cooper also spent a large portion of her time teaching Mrs. Heidi how to teach and drill the spelling of words. Mrs. Al addressed her frustration about being taught mathematics by her child's teacher and still not understanding the new concepts.

Ms. Katti, however, spent very little time teaching academic concepts to the parents in any of her conferences. Teaching the parents was not an expressed conference purpose for her. The closest example of a teaching behavior was in the scaffolding that she did for Rhonda. This interaction was done to provide support for Rhonda as her father was challenging Rhonda's writing through humorous statements. In another conference when Mr. Amber inquired about the division concept being difficult for students to grasp, Ms. Katti began to give a teaching type of response, but lost Mr. Amber's attention to Amber's accounting of her accomplishments.

The fact that Mr. Amber did not attend to Ms. Katti's explanation of how division is taught in her classroom is not indicative of disinterest. It was more a demonstration of

attending to the teacher's expressed purpose of the conference as being a time for the student to demonstrate his/her learning. Ms. Katti's use of silence encouraged the focus of the conference to be on the student's expression of his/her learning. Ms. Katti's conferences provided evidence of the possibilities for focused communication during the parent-teacher conference when a mindful discourse approach is taken.

Mindful and intentional communication provides the opportunity for the teacher to create collaborative exchanges. The parent-teacher conference that Ms. Katti had with Steve and his parents is an example of the valuable information that can be brought to the conference when parents are afforded the wait time to promote sharing. Ms. Katti created an environment that both honored and respected the right of the parents to be pleased with Steve's independent achievement in spelling even though the grade was lower than previously. Ms. Katti also demonstrated a respect for the experiences Amber's parents discussed that happened outside of school and provided an insight into the parent's efforts to reinforce and connect home activities to school concepts.

The discourse of these parent-teacher conferences is shaped primarily by the teachers' purposes. If the purpose of the teacher is to report information to the parent, this overarching purpose generated the use of authoritative and propositional language during the conference. Even though the teachers identified additional purposes for the conference time, the language of the teacher was tied directly to the overarching purpose that the teacher identified in the interview. The all-pervasive purpose for Ms. Smith and Ms. Cooper was to report to the parents on the progress of the student. Both of these teachers and parents indicated that the purpose of the conference was to report/gain information about the student's achievement and progress in school. However, a

secondary purpose was identified almost as often and that was for the parent/teacher to report/gain information about the child outside of school. However, the constraints of previous school experiences and politeness of our society limited the successful accomplishment of this purpose. When both of these purposes were expected and evident in the conferences, then time became a major issue.

Ms. Smith's interactions with Mrs. Mac is an example of the teacher's purpose of teaching parents as well as reporting student information taking up so much time that Mrs. Mac was afraid she would not be able to ask her question. When Ms. Smith watched the video of the conference she was appalled that she had been so insensitive to Mrs. Mac's obvious attempts to interject comments and ask questions. Ms. Smith was very clear that she wanted to have a time to share information with her parents. This involved both giving her report and soliciting information about her students from the parents. Yet, her use of the time and carefully orchestrated reading of the narrative allowed little opportunity for the parents to participate in the sharing.

Mrs. Shelly, however, was able to derail Ms. Smith's reading and gain a meaningful interaction. This valuable interaction provided a glimpse of what could take place when the parent and teacher come together to talk about academic concepts involved in student learning. Ms. Smith was able to capitalize on the parent's expressed confusion of Shelly's reading skills. Ms. Smith again expressed during her video viewing how amazed she was that Mrs. Shelly had so little understanding of Shelly's reading accomplishments. She also indicated that the view of Shelly's reading skills offered by her mother generated a new awareness of Shelly's developing multiple literacy skills.

What are the effects of the parent's language choices on the parent-teacher conference? While the teacher is obviously the accepted director of the parent-teacher conference, some parents were more adept at getting the opportunity to be heard and receive a response.

Mrs. Heidi repeatedly asked questions of Ms. Cooper that went unanswered. Mrs. Mac tried to interject information several times but was unable to capture Ms. Smith's attention sufficiently to shift her focus from her established agenda. Ms. Cooper did not pick up on the mismatch in discourse as she viewed Heidi's video taped conference. Ms. Smith recognized her error as she reflected during the post conference video viewing of Mac's conference.

Mrs. Heidi provided some illumination on a possible cause of the missed cues in this interaction. She said she chose not to be assertive when she believed Ms. Cooper was using an incorrect spelling of jewelry. Mrs. Heidi was very certain that she shouldn't risk a challenge when she was on Ms. Cooper's territory. This willingness to defer to the teacher's view is a part of societal politeness code. But, part of it is also derived from Mrs. Heidi's view of school as an institution that has total control of her children's access to services and privilege. Mrs. Heidi has already experienced the power of school as an institution through previous conferences. Her perception of these interactions always left her feeling powerless to persuade the educators that her children were normal and perhaps the performance problems were as much a result of the inflexible teaching approaches used in classrooms. These prior experiences prompted Mrs. Heidi to position herself as a less knowledgeable person than she actually is in order to protect any subsequent

instructional opportunities for her child. Mrs. Heidi did however write to Ms. Cooper a follow up note pointing out the correct dictionary spelling of jewelry.

The prepositional, authoritative pattern of discourse effectively reports to parents. However, it does not allow for collaborative communication or sharing of perspective that is bi-directional. Teacher talk commands allegiance and acceptance and is a default register for the parent-teacher conference of Ms. Smith and Ms. Cooper. The parent's then utilize the position of information receiver in order to ensure a safe environment for their child in the classroom, as a part of the school as an institution. The question still remains, how is Ms. Katti able to keep the parent-teacher conference discourse generative. She is able to gain valuable information from parents and still meet the reporting requirement of the parent-teacher conference.

Is there a Discourse of Education evident in these parent teacher conferences? This study has provided sufficient information to justify further investigation of a Discourse of Education idea. The strong similarities of discourse moves in the parent-teacher conference to the discourse as studied in the classroom have left me asking if the teacher talk register (Cazden, 1988) carries over into the adult conversations of the parent-teacher conference. The effect of the match and mismatch between these teachers' overarching world views and the discourse used in the parent teacher conference creates enough commonality between classroom discourse and the parent-teacher conference discourse to prompt the need for additional research regarding the parent-teacher conference and the possibility of a Discourse of Education.

General Implications

This study, demonstrates that the communication competency level of the teacher is clearly crucial. By considering Figure 12 (Chapter 5) in relationship to the language choices exhibited in these conferences I have inferred the teachers' levels of communication competency. Ms. Cooper seems to be operating at level 2 during her conferences. Mrs. Heidi and Mrs. Al both expressed intentional choices about language use during the parent-teacher conference. During the post-conference interviews and video viewing experiences the parents seemed to be more conscious of the effect of language choices on the overall outcome of the conference than Ms. Cooper was.

Ms. Smith appears to be aware of the communication needed to operate at level 3 on the communication competency scale, but is less adept at balancing what she desires to have happen while interacting with the parents and completing her planned agenda during this singular event. Again, the parents were quite aware and shared thoughts regarding their beliefs regarding the effect of contacting the teacher and the possible results for their student. The parents reflected about conscious choices they make when interacting with the classroom teacher.

Ms. Katti and the parents appear to be operating at level 3 on the communication competency figure during these conferences. They use reflective language to solicit clarification from each other. They work as collaborators to generate the best learning environment possible for the students.

Also evident was the teacher's planning for communication with the parents needs to include a time when the parents can ask questions and share information that is important to the parent. If the parent-teacher conference is for the purpose of reporting

only student progress, then additional venues must be available for the parent to address concerns or share information. If the teacher has determined to share the student progress report outside of the time designated for the parent-teacher conference, then, as Ms. Katti demonstrated, additional communication purposes may be met during the conference time. The purpose and planning of the parent-teacher conference predetermines the language during the conference and contributes to the resulting "sense" of participant satisfaction.

The degree of match or mismatch of views and expectations between the parent and teacher mitigated the degree of their language choices. Discourse affects the sense of the parent-teacher conference, especially when the elements of purpose, expectations, and participants' views are factored into the equation.

Table 8 shows some of the potential match and/or mismatches that occurred in these parent-teacher conferences. This information, a discussion of matches/mismatches, and how they are mediated at the teacher's level of communication competency closes this section.

Table 8 Views

Participants	General World View	General Teaching and Learning View	School Institution View	Parent-Teacher Conference
Sunset District				
Ms. Cooper	• Teachers know best for child and society	• Spelling interaction • Ways to grade child's work at home should look like school	• Classroom is teacher's territory • Expectations for home and school.	• Timely attendance • IEP assessment evidence and results
Mrs. Heidi	• Challenges school power • Parents know their children. • Teachers need to value what parents know.	• Spelling creativity vs. accuracy • Transference of spelling instruction • Child has a learning style; teacher should adjust	• Dyslexia; IEP • Referential pronouns • Teacher stereotypes	• Parent knows spelling • Shared interest doesn't guarantee communication
Mrs. Al	• Accepts school's power • School environment matches prior experiences	• Teach individual children • Meet his/her learning style	• Requesting permission to report on materials read.	• Parent can research ideas and come with an agenda
Frontier District				
Mrs. Smith	• Teacher knows best • Modeling adult/child interaction	• Teacher models how to interact with child at home	• Teacher is responsible; parents are assigned	• Guide the discussion and report information
Mrs. Shelly	• Teachers know best • Prior knowledge of school and reading	• Reading is sounding out words; new knowledge gained in PT conference that reading is more.	• Teachers know and parents are to follow directions •	• Teacher has an agenda and parent listens to learn
Mrs. Mac	• School has power and works for her child • Parent's request to ask question	• Teachers know	• Teachers lead conference	• Teacher will report and keep parent informed

Table 8 Views continued

Participants	General World View	General Teaching and Learning View	School Institution View	Parent Teacher Conference
Frontier District				
Ms. Katti	• Teachers and parents share responsibility	• Parent have lots to share • Parents know how child learns at home	• School instruction how it should be done	• Report sent prior to conference; parents bring questions. • Students strut their work
Mr. & Mrs. Amanda	• Importance of listening to child and knowing what they learn	• Parents ask good questions • Teacher and student are capable of leading conference • All participants should be informed	• Student is doing well; no concerns • Child leads discussion about work	• Child can present information about own learning.
Mr. Rhonda	• Shared responsibility for child • Parents expected to be involved	• Shared responsibility to have child learn. • Order and neatness are primary goals	• Each school has its own structure, rules for performing	• Student has ideas-conjectures
Mr. & Mrs. Steve	• Teachers and parents share responsibility for child	• Concerns over next steps in school; other ways of "doing" school • Children learn by doing and explaining	• School sets rules/policy • Parents believe in the teachers	• Can clarify understanding with teacher • Controls student's level of dependence

While looking at these tables I encourage the reader to consider the information

and vignettes presented in Chapter 5. Each of the cells in Table 8 provides descriptive

phrases representing the participants' perspectives. This table is designed to show the

variety of potential mismatch in views that occurred during these parent teacher

conferences. Samples of these mismatches are presented in this closing chapter. By

looking across the array of views that are present we can see how knowledge and

structures may offer bridges or barriers to valuable communication in the parent teacher

conference. From these samples I highlight the parent teacher conference structures that support improved levels of satisfaction for the participants.

Each section of this chapter refers to vignettes to identify examples of language based on the form and function of words that guided me to represent the world view, teaching and learning view, school as institution view and current parent teacher conference view of the participants. These views then position each participant as a collaborator, reporter, receiver, activist, or dissenter. These views also prompted me to consider the participant as a communicators operating from conscious incompetence, unconscious incompetence, conscious competence, unconscious competence (Figure 12). I argue that if researchers are to account for differing levels of satisfaction and understandings resulting from the same interaction, then they must consider these elements.

The participants operated within a level of communication competency described previously. Each perspective and the level of communication competency influenced the level of satisfaction derived from these parent-teacher conferences. This includes a discussion regarding five features of the form and function of words that demand research attention: (1) the previous experiences participants bring to a common speech event; (2) positioning of people through word choice; (3) potential for developing intersubjectivity; (4) the presence of a specific Discourse within the parent-teacher conference; (5) and potential markers of zones of proximal development for participants.

If we consider the category of unconscious incompetence, in which the conversant is unaware that communication is not accomplishing the task of informing or creating shared views, we could expect to see the most mismatches between the participants.

Conversely, if we believe the conversant is operating at the level of conscious competence in communication, then we would expect to find more shared meanings and sense of satisfaction between the parent and teacher during the conference. Looking at Table 8 and the earlier vignettes it is evident that this prediction has merit.

Mismatched Perspectives

On the one end of the continuum, we see Mrs. Heidi and Ms. Cooper. Mrs. Heidi and Ms. Cooper have several mismatches in perspectives presented in Table 8 and the vignettes (Chapter 5) demonstrate the mismatch. This study illustrates how previous experiences and assumptions under-gird the choices of the participant's words. These mismatches occur in the way participants use words that position each other and themselves during the conference. One example of this is evident in the greeting between Mrs. Heidi and Ms. Cooper (Chapter 5, pp 148-150). Mrs. Heidi arrived late and used humor to try to defuse her embarrassment for being late (postconference interview). Ms. Cooper, operating within the unconscious incompetent range of communication, missed the opportunity to restore face for Mrs. Heidi.

The use of the personal pronouns "I will go over with you" established the control of the conference with Ms. Cooper. Mrs. Heidi then acknowledged that she has no questions since she had forgotten the conference time and was feeling somewhat unprepared (Mrs. Heidi's postconference interview). Ms. Cooper was surprised to hear this. The overlap that Ms. Cooper used totally exposed the mismatch of the teacher and parent.

Ms. Cooper   but did you come with any particular questions for me to think about?

(Teacher and parent look at each other-eye contact)

Mrs. Heidi	No (Spoke quietly and shifted in chair.)
Ms. Cooper	(Smiled.) No, because we talk so often on the phone (open as though a question).

Ms. Cooper then continued, without the face-saving moves that would have allowed Mrs. Heidi to feel that her forgetfulness was forgiven (postconference interview). Rather, as Ms. Cooper continued she selected pronouns that created the potential for placing Mrs. Heidi in a position of receiver of information—and perhaps even the less knowledgeable individual. Certainly Ms. Cooper's choice of pronouns "your Heidi" for the beginning of the conversation about Heidi's performance assigns responsibility to Mrs. Heidi and her husband.

Ms. Cooper	Okay, we will get you home for that (teacher takes paper from folder; points to it). This article is for you and Jack but I see *your* Heidi as showing dyslexia symptoms.

This type of exchange accentuates the mismatch of perspectives and positions the parent as the receiver of information. Mrs. Heidi indicated in the postconference interview that she felt the school is not sensitive to the instructional needs of an individual child. When talking with Mrs. Heidi, she assigned a group noun to people that had made decisions about the instruction of her children, rather than using personal pronouns to reference these decisions.

> I don't think I have three children that all have special educational needs. Maybe the *school* needs to realize there is more than one way to teach— the *school's* way is not suited to all children. It may be more an issue of learning style rather than ability (postconference interview).

Although Mrs. Cooper indicated that her purpose for this conference was to report on how Heidi was doing in the classroom, she also reported other information, such as the article on dyslexia. This information positions the teacher as a knowledgeable individual and in opposition to the information the special education screening committee had provided to Mrs. Heidi. Once again Ms. Cooper has created the potential for dissatisfaction to occur between herself and Mrs. Heidi as she reported information that she did not receive first hand and then diminished the information that Mrs. Heidi brought to the conference. The IEP report clearly indicated that the screening committee found no sign of a learning disability or dyslexia. Yet, Mrs. Cooper continued to say that Heidi is dyslexic.

Ms. Cooper	okay, we will get you home for that (Teacher takes paper from folder; points to it) this article is for you and Jack but I see *your* Heidi as showing dyslexia symptoms.

These two vignettes highlight the mismatch in the general world view and school as institution perspective of these two participants. Mrs. Heidi believed she had valuable information about Heidi and Mrs. Cooper believed that the teacher knew the child best and had a handle on how to parent the child as well. Mrs. Cooper demonstrated this when she believed it was inappropriate to hold the older child responsible for Heidi's shyness (postconference interview).

These vignettes provide information that leads to the following implications for teachers and researchers. Teachers need to be aware of the limitations of the knowledge they bring to this conference. Teachers need to listen carefully to what information the

parents bring to a conference and not quickly dismiss this information. Participants can

make decisions based on a group stereotype like parents or teachers or an institution.

Matched Perspective

Continuing with the world view match we can see how Mrs. Al and Ms. Cooper

are more alike in their view of the world and how that lends itself to a satisfying

conference with the information and next steps available to all of the participants.

Mrs. Al brings this common view out as she thinks back to her connections to Ms.

Cooper.

> I knew her son before I even knew her only because we had met him at
> this youth group thing. Actually my dad and Jane's husband worked
> together for Standard Oil. I knew the name of Cooper for years through
> my Dad when I was living at home. So there was that kind of a
> relationship too. They know my parents and my parents knew them (video
> viewing interview).

Mrs. Al and Ms. Cooper both expressed a high level of satisfaction with the

conference. Ms. Cooper indicated her belief in Mrs. Al as a parent that could be trusted

to read and follow through on information that was given to her during the conference.

"You're the kind of parent that when I hand you material you will read it" (conference

transcript). Ms. Cooper also reflected on the results of this conference with Mrs. Al by

attributing her own knowledge growth to the research of Mrs. Al. "I am much more

educated on ADD thanks to one mom who has done much research. I do feel grateful that

I started this family on a path for answers to their son's behavior way last fall." This

reflection on the interaction and connections that the teacher and parent have over time is

helpful to identify the potential for match in perspectives for this conference.

The previous experiences may be one explanation for the match in this conference. The positioning of each participant as a valued collaborator is also present in the language choices here. Each participant provides discourse moves that allow face to be saved. An example of this is the request and granting of permission to Mrs. Al to be the primary speaker and provider of information at this conference. The respect that is demonstrated for the knowledge of each participant provides opportunity for developing intersubjectivity. During the postconference interviews, both Ms. Cooper and Mrs. Al repeatedly referenced the respect they had for each other. Mrs. Al and Ms. Cooper are collaborators. Both teacher and parent indicated this relationship during their reflections in the post-conference interviews.

These same language forms and functions allow the mismatch as identified between Mrs. Heidi and Ms. Cooper. The statement made by Ms. Cooper that parenting classes would be valuable for these parents indicates the level of confidence she has in their decisions. Mrs. Heidi is assigned responsibility for Heidi's shyness to sibling quarrels, while Ms. Cooper said that her shyness was not the reason for academic difficulties, dyslexia was the problem. Ms. Cooper positioned Mrs. Heidi as a receiver of information through her choice of pronouns and other words. Mrs. Heidi positioned herself as a dissenter by withholding clarification requests and using many non-committing responses. Mrs. Heidi stated that she chose to not challenge Ms. Cooper's explanation of the preferred spelling of the word jewelry during the conference. Rather, she went home, looked the word up and then wrote a note to Ms. Cooper that addressed the issue. Mrs. Heidi stated that she felt it would have been inappropriate to challenge the teacher's knowledge during the conference. Although I can't be certain what motivated

227

this cautious response to a perceived error in information, I do know that the views of this parent and teacher did not match and did not provide communication that was satisfying to either person.

The element of the participants' communication competence for these two participants is also a factor in the possibility that the participants are functioning at a conscious level in order to support intersubjectivity. Both Mrs. Heidi and Mrs. Al, said they chose to overlook some statements that were made during the conference in order to accomplish greater tasks. One example was the issue of the correct spelling for jewelry. Another topic that was purposefully set aside was during Mrs. Al's conference, when Ms. Cooper had the wrong student's materials in Al's portfolio. Mrs. Al did point this out to Ms. Cooper in a way that allowed Ms. Cooper to save face. Mrs. Al did not think that it was an error that had any real effect on the conference.

Mrs. Heidi, on the other hand, did feel that Ms. Cooper made some statements that she found inaccurate. Mrs. Heidi intentionally chose to avoid any challenge because she viewed Ms. Cooper as one of the group representing "school" people that were not willing to consider the way they interacted with "families" to honor the knowledge that parents bring about their children. Mrs. Heidi voiced her dissatisfaction at the postconference interview. She also displayed her disengagement through body language during the conference. Moves like breaking eye contact, looking away from the speaker, moving back in her chair all provided cues that she was not comfortable with the information Ms. Cooper gave her. Mrs. Heidi identified these types of moves in the video viewing, i.e., information that was uncomfortable for her. Earlier in this study I

cited examples regarding dyslexia, the spelling of jewelry, the way in which Heidi would spell words, and so on. (Chapter 5).

When I asked if the parents thought that their concerns were addressed adequately, Ms. Cooper stated that she believed that both Mrs. Heidi and Mrs. Al "had plenty of time to address their questions openly. Both feel comfortable with me and are very open" (postconference interview).

This match and mismatch can be seen in varying degrees with each of the other teacher's conferences. Each participant voiced levels of satisfaction. I found it interesting to note the awareness level as Ms. Smith and Ms. Katti viewed the videotaped conference. They were very open to the potential for mismatch in their interactions with parents. Ms. Cooper, however, was less engaged and did not identify any places she wanted to clarify during the video viewing experience.

Ms. Smith stated that it surprised her that Mrs. Shelly was so surprised by the good report on Shelly. "She said several times, I am so pleased in an almost surprised way. Like it was better than she expected." Ms. Smith went on to report that she believed the conference was "very productive and real positive. I shared everything with the parents I wanted to, I wasn't, I didn't feel there was anything I had to hold back." Ms. Smith continued, "I felt I verified her progress, prescribed some goals, and I think the whole conference enhanced Mom's self esteem as a parent and Shelly's self esteem as a student."

Mrs. Shelly also left with a sense of satisfaction. When asked the question: "When you finished the conference did you feel that you have gained a greater understanding of the responsibilities of the teacher, student, and parent?" Mrs. Shelly

responded, "I know I understand more, how much more they teach and how much more

they do. Ms. Smith was straight right from the beginning about that kind of stuff. I get a

better understanding each conference I go to. You know I get more information."

Although I found some mismatches in perspectives, these mismatches seemed to

be clarified and a real sense of learning resulted. Mrs. Shelly, points this out in the

discussion about what Shelly does as she reads.

> I was actually surprised, as you know, the way she was learning. Because
> I don't remember that when I was a kid. I remember, See Dick run. See
> Jane run. See Spot run. You know I don't remember being taught. I
> mean that's many years ago. But, I just don't remember that sight
> recognition type of thing. I remember having to sound everything out.
> You know and I don't know if they are teaching it different now.
> Obviously it is working. She is just exceptional in reading. It amazed me
> to see how she was reading it. How she was looking at the word and
> remembering the whole word not the spelling of it or the sounding of it.
> The word looks like 'want' so it is.

Ms. Smith used the mismatch in teaching and learning view about reading

strategies to scaffold Mrs. Shelly's understanding about the acquisition of reading skills.

During the conference Ms. Smith took the time to answer questions and clarify

understanding so that this parent would be able to help Shelly use at least two strategies

when reading at home.

Through carefully structuring the narrative this teacher has raised her own

sensitivity to possible areas of misunderstandings. Ms. Smith is aware of how a parent's

previous experiences and resulting understandings may create confusion. The narrative

provided convenient stopping points to clarify each participant's understanding of the

information being presented. Although these stopping points are available, the topics of

discussion may not have facilitated or provided openings for all of the questions that a

parent may bring to the conference. Another example of a mismatch in Ms. Smith's conferences involves Mrs. Mac.

All the information and stopping points that were provided in the carefully designed narrative still did not facilitate Mrs. Mac's question during Mac's conference. She listened and interacted appropriately as a receiver of information during the conference. However, at the end of the conference we see Mrs. Mac lunging at the chance to ask a question. Ms. Smith observed:

> I realize that there were some cues that the parent wanted to talk, but well, it is my agenda, I am responsible for getting through the agenda so. It is my intention to be open enough, to have the agenda to be a guide and any information that I can get from the parent, my agenda is open to incorporating what the parent's agenda is too.

Mrs. Mac referred to the conference and her satisfaction in the following way. Though Mrs. Mac respects and appreciates Ms. Smith immensely, she stated that she would have liked more time to explore some of the information given. The conversation was congenial and each participant seemed engaged with the topic as the teacher introduced it, but Mrs. Mac did not extend the conversation beyond the initial comments of the teacher. However, Mrs. Mac said she had a question about the upcoming science project and wanted to get an answer to her question before the conference was over (postconference interview). Approaching the end of the conference, Mrs. Mac realized the time for getting this question answered had nearly gone and quickly moved to use the open space in the talk to ask her question. Ms. Smith indicated that she had missed Mrs. Mac's cues to interject information while the work section of the conference was in process. Ms. Smith was surprised to observe in the video viewing that Mrs. Mac had

tried to ask for information and was unable to complete the request, due to Ms. Smith

being focused on moving through the narrative (video viewing interview).

| Ms. Smith | Oh, I am getting to jabbering and it is time to |

(Parent verbally jumps into the teacher's statement.)

| Mrs. Mac | I just wanted to ask you one quick question, Mac had brought |
| | I guess you are doing some type of program on uhmm like drug awareness. I just wanted to make sure I understand this correctly; what I was going to do is get a poster board like 8x14 or paper and draw. Is that what you want? |

| Ms. Smith | yes, we have... |

Ms. Smith goes on to answer Mrs. Mac's question specifically about the planned

project. This was the only time during the conference that Mrs. Mac initiated a new topic

and a question with a desire for specific clarification. Mrs. Mac indicated that it was

important to her to get this question answered at this conference, since the project was

due soon. When Ms. Smith viewed the conference, she commented on the number of

times that she seemed to go on without being aware that Mrs. Mac wanted to interject

some information or continue the exchange on a current topic.

Ms. Smith was interested in knowing if Mrs. Mac also perceived that the teacher

had missed the cues, which would have allowed the parent to talk. Ms. Smith was

focused on her responsibility of reporting to the parent and missed the parent's cues and

did not allow room for questions and information sharing with the teacher. This in effect

positioned the parent as a receiver of information rather than a partner in building the

agenda. Though the potential for mismatch between the participants' views exists, the

teacher's communication competence holds the potential to diminish the effect of the mismatch as seen in Ms. Smith's conferences.

I saw further evidence of conscious communication competence in Ms. Katti's conferences. I looked at Ms. Katti's conferences in light of the match and mismatch of participant's views, and clearly found that fewer statements provided indicators of mismatch.

Ms. Katti stated that the student's report card information goes home prior to the scheduled parent teacher conference. The parents then come to the conference having read the information and ready to ask any questions that they may have.

> It's (conference format) relaxed. Parents have seen the stuff ahead of time, the focus is not on the actual report card. It is more on you know what else is there that needs to be worked on for the rest of this year. The child's thinking is real important. I try to work like a team (postconference interview).

With this idea in mind we can see what occurred with Mr. and Mrs. Steve during the conference. The word "spatialvisualization" was used in the report and generated some difficulty in comprehending (Chapter 5 pp. 180-181).

Mr. Steve	What I was trying to do was make it one huge word instead of two words spatial visualization and that's what...(looks at mom again. Mom has her eyes on Steve's journal)
Ms. Katti	yeah, that'd throw you...(said softly again)

This interaction provides a nice picture of how silence can give space for parents to address misunderstandings in textual material. Silence also gave the teacher an opportunity to realize what words are "educational jargon" and may bring confusion to parents. The way in which Mr. Steve brought this to Ms. Katti's attention utilizes the

best of social politeness. He positioned himself as the learner. Mrs. Steve reinforced this when they went to Steve for clarification, hoping he may have used the word in school. When that failed they went to the dictionary and there found that they were trying to understand two words, which appeared to them to be one larger word.

When Mr. Steve brought the word to Ms. Katti's attention, she immediately indicated she knew how to spell the word. Mr. Steve mended the possible offense by assuring the teacher that they were not questioning her spelling ability, rather they were acknowledging their lack of knowledge with the word "spatialvisualization." The silence in this case gave the parents room to alert Ms. Katti to the potential misunderstanding and that they were willing to expand their vocabulary through consulting other people, i.e., Steve and reference books (the dictionary).

Ms. Katti and Steve's parents were able to use the time of the conference to clarify any possible misunderstandings that this word may have created. The parents in this conference also addressed specifically the issue of Steve's spelling grade. Steve's grade went down during this grading period. Mr. and Mrs. Steve shared with Ms. Katti that, even though the grade was lower, they were pleased with Steve's spelling grade. He had taken over the responsibility of studying and preparing himself for the spelling test. This transfer of responsibility from the parents to the student was the goal these parents had identified for the last grading period. The actual grade was not as high as previous grades, however, the focus of the learning for the grading period, as far as the parents were concerned, revolved around the student's self monitoring and accepting responsibility for the management of his own learning.

The potential for mismatch of views and goals was present here, Ms. Katti

believed in the parents setting goals for their student's learning. Ms. Katti reflected on

this portion of the conference stating, "knowing (this parent) and knowing that she is

giving her child the freedom to be responsible for his own learning at home with spelling

words, I respect that" (postconference interview). Ms. Katti reported her thinking about

the conference with these words.

> We (Ms. Katti and her teammate) have two children from this family in the room. I always ask the question, "Are there any concerns or comments?" I write down if there is a goal that the child wants to work on or if there is one the parent thinks the child should work on for the rest of the year. I write it down and really try to pay attention to it for the rest of the year.

In reflecting on the conference format, Ms. Katti stated that, "the purpose for the

child having something to show is to remove me from the expert role." It is a conscious

decision for this teacher to remain quiet and allow the child to explain what it is that s/he

knows.

> (This conference format) also gives me a chance to sit back and look at what the child learned. Which is also very interesting to do. Why did they pick that page? Why are they talking about this? It is just insight (postconference interview).

Ms. Katti and Steve's parents shared that over time they have had and continue to

have a lot of interaction both in and outside of school. Two children have been in this

multiage classroom and a history has developed. One of the first things they addressed at

the conference was continuing the connection for the children and Ms. Katti. Was she

planning to move to the next grade with these students?

Two issues came out of this look at Ms. Katti's conferences. One is the length of

time the parents and teacher have had to develop understanding of and respect for each

other. Each of the parents has had a child with Ms. Katti for two years. Over the years these families and the teacher have interacted and they have reached a shared agenda and understanding of each other.

The other issue is the use of language and silence to provide the type of interaction that puts the student center stage. I cannot say definitively that the potential mismatch of participants' perspectives would all disappear if conferences were conducted like Ms. Katti's conferences. But I can say that the participants of these parent-teacher conferences expressed a deep respect for the views of each other. They also demonstrated some very good collaboration skills to come to agreement on the goals for teaching and learning that operate in this classroom.

As we can see from the Table 8 Ms. Katti and the parents did not all mention the same things to focus on during the conference. However, it was evident that as I interviewed each of the participants, careful listening, thoughtful language and respect for each other provided a satisfying experience for all of the participants.

Ms. Katti and Steve's parents shared that over time they have had and continue to have a lot of interaction both in and outside of school. Two children have been in this multiage classroom and they have a history developed. One of the first things they addressed at the conference was continuing the connection for the children and Ms. Katti. Was she planning to move to the next grade with these students?

Two issues come out of this look at Ms. Katti's conferences. One is the length of time the parents and teacher have had to develop understanding of and respect for each other. Each of the parents had a child with Ms. Katti for two years.

Over the years that these families and teacher have interacted they have reached a shared agenda and understanding of each other for the education of the children. The other is the use of language and silence to provide the type of interaction that puts the student center stage. While we cannot say definitively that the potential mismatch of participants' perspectives would all disappear if conferences were conducted like Ms. Katti has conducted this one. We can say that the participants we viewed in these parent teacher conferences exhibited a deep respect for the views of each other. They also demonstrated some very good collaboration skills to come to agreement on goals for teaching and learning that operate in this classroom.

As we can see from the table Ms. Katti and the parents did not all mention the same things to focus on during the conference. Many different issues came up as I interviewed each of the participants, yet the intentional listening, mindful communication, and respect for each other that was evident in Ms. Katti's conferences provided a satisfying experience for all of the participants.

Intentional listening is a part of mindful communication and is evident when the teacher is listening to construct shared meaning. Ms. Smith provided an example as she worked to clarify/connect and construct a shared meaning of learning to read with Mrs. Shelly. She used strategies such as clarification, summarizing, restatement, and connecting during that interaction. Ms. Katti demonstrated examples of intentional listening as she attended closely to the parent and student interactions with the intent of supporting the student's demonstration of knowledge. She also was intentional in her listening as Mr. and Mrs. Steve gave an explanation of their response to Steve's lower spelling grade. She tried to listen carefully and be informed by the parent's perspective of

Steve's spelling performance. The ability to step into the view of another person and to distance ones self from one personal view is critical to intentional listening and mindful communication.

This study has exposed the potential for teachers to use language in the parent-teacher conference that is reflective of classroom discourse. A teacher's classroom discourse uses language that provides prepositional information. If it is authoritative, it offers little opportunity for students to respond with variant views or offer additional information. The teachers in this study demonstrated the limitations of this default discourse in creating open exchange of ideas during the parent-teacher conference.

Within this study, it is also evident that the potential mismatch of perspectives exacerbates the misunderstandings between parents and teachers during the parent-teacher conference. While I observed teachers using classroom discourse during the parent-teacher conference, I also observed mindful language use, intentional listening, and honest respectful exchanges of ideas between parents and teachers. The value of this study's findings lies in focusing attention on the development of these qualities in teachers' communication skills.

Implications for Teacher Education and Teacher Practice

Everybody has been through school and expects it to be like it was when they were there. We get some questions in the fall about teaching conceptually rather than like they learned (Ms. Katti, postconference interview).

Teachers and parents from all walks of life hold a variety of perspectives and come together for conferences. It is imperative that the communication occurring be meaningful for all participants in order to provide each child the opportunity to perform

well in school and achieve the skills and dispositions of a life-long learner. Providing

teachers with knowledge about discourse, communication competencies and listening

skills will produce greater opportunities for students to learn and a greater sense of

satisfaction as parents and teachers communicate throughout the school year.

The vignettes in this study provide information that leads to the following

implications for teachers, teacher educators, and researchers. Teachers need to:

1. Be aware of the limitations of the knowledge that they bring to the parent-teacher conference. Their knowledge represents only a snapshot of the child's larger life picture.

2. Listen carefully to the information parents bring to a conference.

3. Consider the impact of making decisions based on group stereotypes.

Teacher Educators need to:

4. Infuse pre-service education and professional development instruction with respect for the strengths that all stakeholders bring to the education arena.

5. Provide a comprehensive understanding of socio-linguistics and its impact on meaning and communication.

6. Understand the needs and attributes of the group that educators refer to as "parents."

7. Develop an understanding of the dynamics involved in interpersonal communication, collaboration, and partnerships.

Enduring Questions for Future Research

Questions that continue to evade quality comprehensive answers include one I

began with. Many of my questions have gained reasonable answers from this study.

However, the data gathered in this study provided some useful insights toward an answer

to the last question. Is a Discourse of education evident in these conferences? This study

provided some provocative challenges regarding the similarity of the IRE pattern in

classroom Discourse and the discourse that occurs in the parent-teacher conference. Further research would be useful to identify the factors that are involved in the initiation, response and evaluation sequence and build on this study's data regarding occurs in parent-teacher conference discourse.

The research regarding "wait time" for students' response in the classroom needs to be taken further by investigating "wait time" for parent responses during parent-teacher interactions.

Another question that arises from this study addresses the issue of power and education. What impact is likely if educators intentionally make the structure and operation of the school system available to parents when questions arise and clarification is required? When educators have conflicting views of student achievement like Ms. Cooper and the special education report, how is instruction monitored based on the information provided?

Closing Thoughts

This study of the discourse within the parent-teacher conference has brought to light some thoughtful information for the participants and for myself as a researcher. The bit of folk wisdom that began this study and stated in the introduction hopefully has more illumination now for teachers and parents as they communicate in the parent-teacher conference.

Humankind operates at the unconscious level in most of our oral interactions. Only as we move into discourse events that generate a new level of incongruity and/or discomfort are we more conscious of our language choices as exhibited by the parents

and some of the teachers in this study. Ms. Cooper's parent-teacher conferences provide a snapshot of traditional conferences with all of the ritualistic elements many of us have experienced. Ms. Smith has invited the student to the conference and allows him/her to demonstrate the skills as needed to complete the story that she is telling. This conference also has all parts of the ritual available. Ms. Katti has successfully created a parent-teacher conference that provides a setting, which challenges the participants to take new roles and changes the expectations for the interaction. It appears that a default mode does not serve the students, parents, or teachers as they participate in a student-led conference, thereby creating a level of conscious communication that provides more satisfaction for everyone.

The language within all of these conferences has some similarity as well as significant differences. Through these differences I have been able to identify some valuable insights into the effect of discourse on the satisfaction of the participants. Continued research in the achievement of mindful communication for educators may reveal even more exciting possibilities for increasing truly collaborative experiences for parents and teachers.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Preconference interview form

A sample of the parent/teacher/student pre-conference interview prompts follows.

1. Please describe your prior experiences with parent-teacher conferences.

   How many conferences have you attended?

   In a single word how would you describe the value of these conferences?
   Useless   Helpful Valuable   Crucial

   What do you consider to be the most important aspect of the conferences you have experienced?

2. What is your understanding of the school's purpose for parent-teacher conferences?

3. What do you hope to gain by coming to this parent-teacher conference?

4. What would happen if you didn't come to this parent-teacher conference?

5. What is your purpose for coming to this parent-teacher   conference?

6. If you could **design something different** than the parent-teacher conference as it is now, what would it be?

7. What do you anticipate will occur as a result of having this conference?

8. How did you prepare for this conference?

9. Does your preparation for one conference differ from your preparation for another conference?

10. Are there any observations that you would like to make regarding this means of communication between the home
    and school?

Appendix B

Postconference interview prompts

Postconference Video Viewing Prompts

Several days after the conference the parent(s), student and I viewed the conference video.. I prompted teacher, parent, and student responses by the following statements.

> I am interested in gaining further understanding of what you were thinking, as you were involved in this conference. As we watch the video tape please tell me to stop the tape whenever you would like to explain what you were thinking, or if you were consciously thinking about adjusting your approach due to something within the conference. You may also ask me to stop the tape if you are surprised by what is being said in relationship to what you remember occurring. I may stop the tape myself at a couple of points, but you may feel free to stop me and give me specific information about an event at any time.

Follow up prompts to use during the video viewing:

Can you help me understand what you were thinking at this point?

Was there a shift in your level of comfort or understanding at this point?

Appendix C

Letter of introduction and brief abstract of the study

Dear Staff member,

I am a doctoral candidate at Michigan State University. I have selected the discourse of the parent teacher conference as my dissertation focus. I would like to enlist your support in exploring this tool for conversation between schools and homes. I need to be able to consider the discourse in operation when conducting conferences as regularly scheduled. There will be a minimum of interruption to your normal procedures.

This study involves a pre-conference and post-conference interview with the teacher and parent/student, taking observation notes and video/audio taping the conversation that goes on in a parent teacher conference. In order to understand some of what goes on in the conference, I will be administering a pre and post conference survey to the teachers and parents of the target conferences regarding their experiences and expectations surrounding parent teacher conferences. These interviews will take place only at times that you feel will not interfere with the normal routine of the school and conferences. These responses will be used only to think about discourse in the parent teacher conference. After the conference there will be the need to view the taped conference with the researcher and "unpack" what was going on during the conference. This stimulated recall interview will take approximately one hour.

On the form below, please indicate whether or not you give your permission to be involved in the study.

Because your participation should be completely voluntary, you can decide if you will not be a part of the study at all, or you can withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. Any staff member who chooses to not be a part of this study will just not be included in the report of the study. If you choose to be a part but are uncomfortable answering any particular interview question, or having the audio or video taped portions continued you have the right to decline an answer and ask for the taping to cease.

For any audio or video taping we might do in the classroom building or school property, you have the right to have us stop the recording at any time. If you do not give your permission to be taped, we will do everything possible to keep from recording you. If we should inadvertently tape you, we will not use any segments of the tapes in which you can be identified.

All of the data that we collect will be treated with strict confidence; your name will not be used in any reports about this project, and any identifying characteristics will be disguised. As indicated on the attached form, you can restrict the uses of the materials we collect that includes yourself.

As a student/intern teacher in the this elementary building you have the same privileges and responsibilities any of the contracted staff members. However, I wish to specifically state that your student status will not be hindered in any way through participation with this study. No portion of the video/audio data will be used as evaluative information regarding your performance.

I hope that you will decide to participate in this study. While no specific benefits can be guaranteed, I believe that the knowledge we gain will be valuable to us and to other

all of us that are involved in trying to improve parent and teacher communication and ultimately the students' learning. If you have any questions or concerns about this study please feel free to contact Bonnie Rockafellow at (517) 774-3975 or (517) 886-0525.

Thank you very much for considering participation in our study!

Sincerely,

Bonnie Rockafellow
Primary Researcher
Michigan State University

Appendix D

Consent form

Consent form - -for parent/child involvement
Letter of explanation from school-

Dear Parent or guardian:
I am a doctoral candidate at Michigan State University. I am requesting your participation in a study of discourse in the parent teacher conference. During the regularly scheduled parent teacher conferences I would like to explore the discourse (conversation/talk) that goes on. There will be a minimum of interruption to the normal procedures.

This study will involve having myself observing the parent teacher conference, taking observation notes and/or doing video/audio taping of the conversation that goes on in the parent teacher conference. In order to understand some of what goes on in the parent teacher conference, I will be interviewing selected parents individually about the discourse they experienced in the conference. I will be taping these responses. These responses will be used only to think about discourse between parents and teachers in the regularly scheduled parent teacher conference. These tapes will not be used for any purposes other than consideration of discourse between parents and teachers. I will also conduct a pre-conference interview survey with the adults and students that attend the conference as well as a post-conference interview survey. Then during an agreed upon time we, parent/student and myself, will view the taped conference and you will help "unpack" what seems to be happening during the conference. This viewing will take about an hour.

I will also be considering the context of communication between the parent/student and teacher during the year only in the sense that it may or may not have established a pattern or rapport for the continuation of communication. If written communication was a part of these contacts, I may desire to think about the notes/letters as they relate to the conversation in the parent teacher conference.

On the form below, please indicate whether or not you give your permission to be involved in the study. In addition to getting your permission for the study, I will make sure to ask you for permission before I do any interviewing or tape recording.

Because your participation should be completely voluntary, you can decide that you will not be a part of the study and you can withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. If you choose to participate in the study, you can choose not to answer any particular interview question, as well as request the taping to cease when ever you desire.

For any audio or video taping we might do in the classroom building or school property, you have the right to have us stop the recording at any time. If you do not give your permission to be taped, we will do everything possible to keep from recording you. If we should inadvertently tape you, we will not use any segments of the tapes in which you can be identified.

All of the data that we collect will be treated with strict confidence; your name will not be used in any reports about this project, and any identifying characteristics will be disguised. As indicated on the attached form, you can restrict the uses of the materials we collect.

I hope that you (parent and student) will choose to participate in this study. While no specific benefits can be guaranteed, I believe that the knowledge we gain will be valuable to

251

teachers who are trying to improve their communication with parents and ultimately student learning. If you have any questions or concerns about this study please feel free to contact Bonnie Rockafellow at (517) 774-3975, or (517) 886-0525.

Thank you very much for considering participation in this study!

Sincerely,

Bonnie Rockafellow
Primary Researcher
Michigan State University

CONSENT FORM FOR All BUILDING STAFF PARTICIPATION

The goals of this study and the nature of my involvement in it have been explained to me. I understand that the data from the study will be maintained indefinitely, to be used for documenting Bonnie Rockafellow's research project and for sharing with others any lessons learned from this study.

The data might be used in reports about the project, in published articles, in presentations at conferences, and in teacher education classes at the university. I have been assured that in any such uses, my identity will not be revealed. I do understand that in any videotape in which I appear I might be recognizable even though no names will be used. I may choose to have any segment of videotape in which I am identifiable not used in the study or in presentations.

I have also been assured that I can deny my participation in any or all of the activities listed below, and I can withdraw my permission as a participant in any or all of these activities at any time, without penalty. I also will have the opportunity to agree or decline to be involved in the study's various activities. Choosing not to participate will have no impact on my right to be a full member of this building and school system.

- -

I give my permission to be a participant in the activities I have indicated below (please use your initials):

I will participate in the interview/surveys specified
    __YES __NO

You may include in your observations my interactions with my students and their parents during the regularly scheduled parent teacher conference.__yes __no

In addition:_You may audio tape these interactions.__yes __no
        You may videotape these interactions.__yes __no
    You may talk to me about my perceptions and attitudes about language patterns in the parent teacher conference.__yes __no

In addition: you may audio tape these conversations.__yes __no

You may use audio and video tapes that include me in presentations as long as you do not identify me by name or through other background information.   yes   no

Staff person's name:_____ _____

Date:_____ Signature: _____

CONSENT FORM FOR Parent/Student PARTICIPATION

The goals of this study and the nature of our involvement in it have been explained to us. I understand that the data from the study will be maintained indefinitely, to be used for documenting Bonnie Rockafellow's research project and for sharing with others any lessons learned from this study.

The data might be used in reports about the project, in published articles, in presentations at conferences, and in teacher education classes at the university. We have been assured that in any such uses, our identity will not be revealed. We do understand that in any videotape in which we appear we may be recognizable even though no names will be used. We may choose to have any segment of videotape in which we are identifiable not used in the study or in presentations.

We have also been assured that we can deny my permission for our participation in any or all of the activities listed below, and we can withdraw our participation in any or all of these activities at any time, without penalty. Choosing not to participate will have no impact on our right to be a fully involved in the student's class activities or conferences.

- -

I give my permission to be included as a participant in the activities I have indicated below (please use your initials):
(Please use both the parent's initials to indicate consent, and the student's initials to indicate assent for each answer).
You may focus your classroom observations on my interactions with the teacher in the parent teacher conference.

P-_/S-_ yes P-_/S-_ no

In addition: You may audio tape these interactions.

P-_/S_ yes P_/S_ no

You may videotape these interactions.

P_/S_ yes P_/S_ no

I will complete the interviews/survey and viewing.

P_/S_ yes P_/S_ no

You may talk to me about my perceptions and attitudes about my experiences in the parent teacher conference.

P_/S_ yes P_/S_ no

In addition: You may audio tape these conversations.

P_/S_ yes P_/S_ no

You may view/copy notes sent between teacher and myself P_/S_

You may use audio and videotapes that include me in presentations as long as you do not identify me by name or through other background information. P_/S_ yes P_/S_ no

Date:_____
Parent's or guardian's name:_____

Signature: _____

Student's name_____Signature_____February 17, 1995

Appendix E

Exit interview

Parent/Teacher Conference
Exit Survey for Parent/student

Since (first, third and fifth) grades are crucial places for developing and continuing

relationships with parents I would like to have you share your ideas/comments with me about the

parent-teacher conference.

It would be helpful if you would respond to the following questions. Please feel free to

write any observations or comments that you may have regarding your present or previous

experiences in the parent/teacher conference situation.

DO NOT SIGN YOUR NAME, these responses will not in any way be used here at the

school. I will be considering the information only for research purposes and to further our

understanding of how to successfully invite parents into the planning of educational experiences

for their children.

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO WRITE ANY ADDITIONAL COMMENTS ON THE BACK

OF THIS SURVEY OR ON ADDITIONAL SHEETS OF PAPER. ANY AND ALL

COMMENTS WILL BE GREATLY APPRECIATED AND USEFUL IN CREATING

POSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR COMMUNICATING ABOUT THE PROGRESS OF

YOUR STUDENTS.

Return to:
Bonnie Rockafellow
5027 Geraldine Dr.
Lansing, MI 48917

On a scale of 0-5 with:

0= no benefit/ only upsetting
1= little benefit/usually not worth coming for
2= some benefit
3= beneficial/informational
4= important
5= can't possibly miss them

How would you rate the benefits of your parent/teacher conferences?

Elements within the conference that were helpful:

____Samples of actual work from my student

Conversation about specific problems in
____Math
____Reading
____Science
____Spelling
____Writing
____Conversation about behavior expectations
____Conversation about social interactions
____Conversation about developmental aspects of children

I gained a greater understanding of:

____The teacher's responsibility at school
____The parents' responsibility at school
____The child's responsibility at school

____   When leaving the conference I knew my ideas were accepted and
                valued by the teacher.
        Comments:

____   When leaving the conference I understood the "next steps" for me
        as a parent/child.

____   There was enough time to get my concerns talked about.

____   I felt welcome to return for more time to talk about issues I raised.

____ The structure of the school was explained so I understood where to go if I was not satisfied with responses to my concerns.

____ The conference was helpful in solving specific problems/concerns that we have within the classroom/school.

Teacher Exit Survey

What is your overall feeling about this conference?

What do you believe you shared with the parents/student that was helpful?

What would you like to have changed about the conference?

How do you think the parent/student felt when they left?

Were their concerns addressed?

Do you believe the parent has knowledge after this conference that is valuable in immediately helping their children improve their school achievement?

What information do you believe you gained from talking with these parents/student?

Do you believe the parent is informed about how to address any further concerns regarding their child's performance if they were not satisfied with your responses?
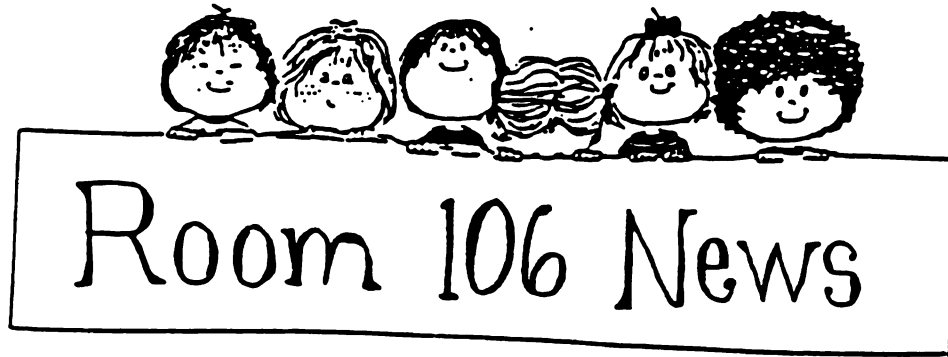
What "next steps" did you give the parent/student?

The major portion of the conference time was taken up by what issues?

The teacher's, parent's, and student's responsibilities were clearly addressed?

Appendix F

Weekly newsletter

Room 106 News

Friday, March 10, 1995

Dear Parents,

I'm very satisfied with our conferences and I appreciate working with such supportive and caring parents! I believe that discussing each student's specific needs and planning their home practice makes a significant difference in the quality of their first grade learning!

Please see the attached notes:

1. <u>GRASP</u> - This is a summer correspndence program for reading and math. Parents who have worked with this program have told me that it has been good for their children. The deadline date is April 19. My expereince has been that this date is final with no exceptions!

2. <u>SPRING PORTRAITS</u> - Wed, March 15 - Students can bring items to "personalize" their pictures.

3. <u>FAMILY DAY</u> at the Michigan Library and Historical Center - Saturday, April 1

Appendix G

Narrative report

March 1995

       is continuing to make progress in all academic areas. He continues to surprise us with how much he knows and how quickly he learns. During Writer's Workshop his stories are improving in appearance and detail. His stories are more legible because he is taking more time writing them. comes into class and gets to work on his journal. Most of his stories have been written independently. He is leading the class in sight vocabulary words. He sounds out words with minimal effort.   enjoys reading, especially when he reads new books to the class. In math he understands the concept of addition and subtraction and knows how to use +/-/= to successfully solve equations. He has mastered the basic facts through 7 and is working on 8-10. He understands the concept of place value and can identify, build, count and write numbers through 100. He can count to 100 by 1s, 2s, 5s and 10s. In health   learned about the body and how to keep it healthy. He also has a good understanding of the basic concepts in social studies and science. We look forward to   progress through the remainder of school

Appendix H

Formal report form

Student Name _____   _____ Teacher_____

Building: _____   Grade___1___ Year

X Introducing

Marking Period	1	2	3
Days Absent	O		
Days Tardy	O		

		1			2			3		
	Meets Expectations	Working On	Area of Concern	Meets Expectations	Working On	Area of Concern	Meets Expectations	Working On	Area of Concern	
Student Growth And Development	✓									Contributes creatively and constructively
	✓-									Cooperates with others
	✓									Focuses and maintains attention
	✓									Uses organizational skills
	✓-									Puts forth effort in daily work
	✓-									Demonstrates appropriate behavior
Communication Arts	✓									**LISTENING**
										Listens for different purposes
										Gives appropriate responses to oral messages
	✓									**SPEAKING**
										Speaks to communicate a message
										Speaks to a variety of audiences
		✓								**WRITING**
										Thinks and plans before writing (pre-writing)
										Develops questions to clarify writing (pre-writing)
										Understands that writing is an on-going process
										Participates in editing (revision)
	✳									**READING**
	✓									Shows interest in reading for pleasure and information
	✓									Uses context and phonics with unknown words
	✓									Comprehends written language
	✓									Understands vocabulary
		✓								Reads with fluency and expression
										SPELLING
		✱								Learns new spelling words
		✓								Uses spelling skills in written work
	✓									**PENMANSHIP** (manuscript, cursive)

1			2			3			
Meets Expectations	Working On	Area of Concern	Meets Expectations	Working On	Area of Concern	Meets Expectations	Working On	Area of Concern	
									MATHEMATICS
✓									Numeration – counting and writing #s
	�								Place value
									Basic number facts
									Addition
									Subtraction
									Multiplication
									Division
									Story problems
									Measurement
									Time
									Money
									Fractions
									Decimals
									Geometry
	✓								Calendar
	✓								Graphs
✓									Patterns – repeating changing
									SCIENCE
✓									**HEALTH AND SAFETY**
									1. Feelings, Problem solving with people, Safety
✓									**SOCIAL STUDIES**
									1. Peace education, Family

COMMENTS

over →

Appendix I
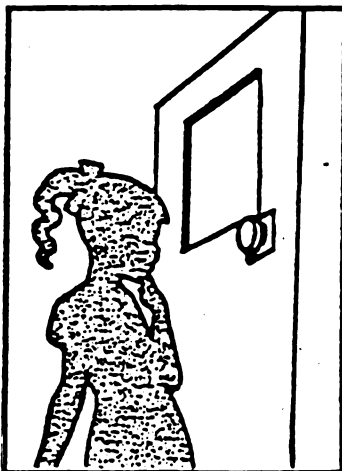
Sample of an informational article

Unexplained fears

Don't be surprised if SIX refuses to go to school after a week or two. It doesn't necessarily mean she dislikes school. Some experience unpleasant to her, such as being asked to count before the class or to pass out the milk, may be the cause. Send her on to school. Plan a special treat for afterward.

Why doesn't she talk?

SIX doesn't talk much about her school experiences at home. If she does, she often tells of "bad" things other children have done or boasts beyond reality of her own accomplishments. The daring classmate who misbehaves most is sure to be reported on in great detail. This "tattling" and enlarging on the truth will stop when SIX is more at home at school.
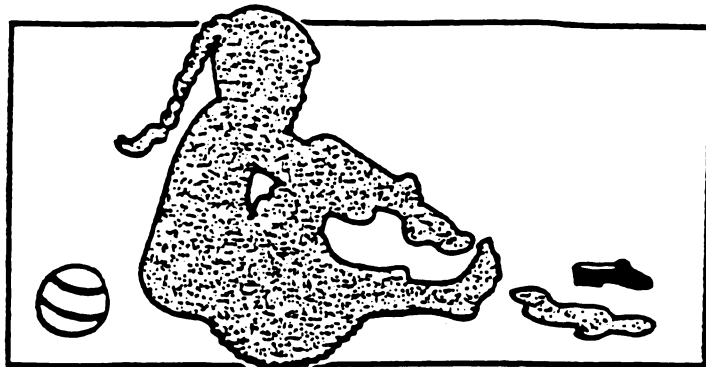
Morning dawdling

SIX usually needs 11 hours of sleep to avoid fatigue and strain. When she wakes, she usually goes to the bathroom and then begins to play. This playing causes problems. SIX must dress, have breakfast and be ready for the bus or carpool if all is to go well. It helps if her clothes are already laid out — singly, not touching, so she can see every piece she will use. She will gradually begin to shift her playing habit to a dressing habit and will be able to get herself dressed before breakfast.

Fast and sloppy

SIX may bring home papers she has colored, cut, or pasted that are alarmingly messy. In speedy and joyous abandon, she wants to do everything, and so finishes little. SIX is also easily distracted and often shifts her eyes to watch another's activity, while her own hands continue to move.
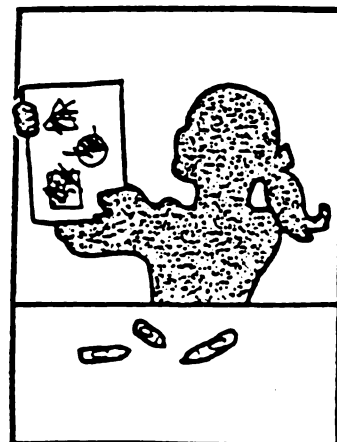
"To me, raising kids is just about the most exciting, maddening, rewarding, exhausting, puzzling, and satisfying occupation there is. There's no foolproof system, because all kids are different. But there's no area in the world where loving common sense and a touch of humor pay such big dividends."
—Art Linkletter—

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270

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