

TEACHERS WORKING WITH FAMILIES:
NATURAL ENEMIES OR NECESSARY ALLIES?

by

Kirsten Cole

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Abstract

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The complex and crucial connection between families and schools is embodied in relationship between individual teachers and their students' families. Research findings demonstrate that high levels of family engagement lead to greater success for students. Such findings drive policy mandates that hold individual teachers accountable for cultivating this relationship. However, not enough is known about how such mandates are enacted on the ground. In an era when teachers are required to adhere to the standardization of curriculum and the uniform recommendations of "best practice" pedagogic models, teachers must still draw on their whole, complex, human selves when seeking to foster relationships with families. The strengths and challenges that teachers bring to this work are developed throughout their entire life histories; from early family and educational experiences, through pre-service teacher preparation, through mentoring and in-service professional development. This study was framed by a desire to understand how teachers' life and professional experiences shape their approach to working with their students' families. In order to address this question, the life histories of five teachers were gathered, documented, and analyzed to identify and explore the patterns and the tensions in how the teachers made sense of their lives and work. The life history method of research was chosen to address the purpose of this study as it offered the most apt match for illuminating the complexities of how teachers approach their work with families. The teachers selected to participate in this study all worked at the same urban, public, progressive, elementary

school whose mission included a vision for a high level of family engagement. In the analysis of the teachers' life histories, issues of language, culture, race, and gender emerged. Analysis of the teachers' stories revealed that teachers' draw on the perspective of their own experiences as they develop strategies for in the very nuanced process of forging relationships with families.

Additionally, this study explored the ways that teachers' work with families can be supported or thwarted by the range of conflicting perspectives and policies regarding the impact of the teacher and her knowledge on the practice of teaching.

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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Much scholarship in current educational research on families and schools has demonstrated the value of genuine, collaborative relationships¹ between home and school (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Mo, & Singh, 2008; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzales, 1992; Valdes, 1996). While the phrase “parental involvement” often evokes an image of stay-at-home mothers participating in fundraising bake sales or classroom read-alouds, scholarship on the topic has expanded the definition of family engagement² in children’s education to be inclusive of a more holistic typology. This typology supports teachers in recognizing the contributions that families make to their children’s education from micro to the macro level: at the level of the individual, providing a safe and healthy home life; at the school level, volunteering at the classroom or school; at the policy level, participating in advocacy and activism on behalf of schools (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Comer, & Haynes, 1991; Epstein, & Dauber, 1991). This expanded view encourages teachers to respect and acknowledge families’ multiple and varied roles in supporting their children’s education. This study explores how teachers who value the varied role that families play in their

¹ For the purposes of this work, my use of the phrase “genuine, collaborative relationships” merits definition. Genuine relationships are entered into out of a true sense of interest in working with each other, beyond the goal of meeting requirements set by external mandates. Collaborative relationships are ones in which both parties are valued and recognized as contributing to the work at hand. When teachers and families enter into genuine, collaborative relationships, both parties acknowledge each other for their different, but equally important contributions. They enter into a working relationship framed by their shared interest of supporting children’s growth and learning, and recognizing that their capacity to do this is increased by working together.

² The phrase “parental involvement” is often used in research and policy related to this topic. When describing such studies and mandates I will use this term. However, whenever possible, I will use the term “family engagement.” This phrase, using the word family in place of parent, highlights that that children are often nurtured and supported by a more extensive and varied network of adults. Additionally, I believe the term engagement suggests a deeper sense of collaboration and connection than the more peripheral sense suggested by the word involvement.

children's education have a greater capacity to foster genuine, collaborative relationships between home and schools.

Nonetheless, additional research indicates that not all teachers are successful at welcoming families to participate in their children's education in the same way, particularly when working across differences of socio-economic status, race or ethnicity (Edwards & Warin, 1999; Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005; Lareau, 1987, 2000, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Lopez, 2001; Valdes, 1996). In these studies, teachers' perceptions of their students' families have been shown to influence the degree to which they are able to collaborate with families. While recent school reforms have mandated that schools increase levels of parental involvement, the responsibility for fostering those connections falls to individual teachers who, for a variety of reasons, may feel ill-prepared or disinclined to do so.

Recent federal and local policy has emphasized the importance of parental involvement, resulting in legislation and mandates that enumerate the ways that schools are to be held accountable to families in developing this relationship. In 2001, the federal No Child Left Behind Act was introduced, which sought to improve schools by requiring that they show demonstrable gains in students' scores on standardized tests. The section of the NCLB that addressed parental involvement identified the ways that families are charged with the responsibility for documenting and reporting on the failures of teachers and schools by a variety of measures (United States Department of Education, 2001). While the intention of these mandates was to improve the quality of the schools, they had the unintended effect of positioning schools and families as adversaries. This emphasis on test scores and the role of families in enforcing the accountability system trickled down to the state and local level (New York City Department of Education School Progress Reports, 2007, 2008 & 2009; New York State Department of

Education, 2006). In New York City schools are evaluated annually and given a letter grade (A through F) that is intended to reflect the quality of the school. Eighty-five percent of that score is calculated as a measure of students' performance and improvement from year to year on state tests in Language Arts and Math. Less than 5% of a school's grade is determined by the results of a survey taken by families, which measures, among other things, the degree to which families feel welcomed by schools to participate in their children's education (Learning Environment Survey, New York City Department of Education School Progress Reports, 2007, 2008 & 2009). In this charged climate of testing and accountability, schools and families often find themselves blaming each other when children's scores do not rise.

It is clear that schools need to work hard to develop genuine, collaborative relationships with *all* families. What is not entirely clear is how that can be achieved, particularly in the current climate. Though many teachers strive to cultivate relationships with families (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), some hold biases toward their students' families or their own negative associations with school/family relationships. These impressions have been forged over the course of the teachers' lives. Both positive and negative experiences contribute to the teachers' approaches toward working with families (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Additionally teachers' practice evolves and is shaped by the culture and practices of the schools in which they do their training and teaching. Teacher education programs, student teaching sites, professional development and mentoring all contribute to teachers' philosophy and approach to teaching. In order to support teachers to work more effectively in working with families, we need to know more about teachers' lives, and, further, how those experiences impact their practice. **The purpose of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of how teachers' life and professional experiences shape their**

approach to working with their students' families. This research focused on the lives of teachers who work at the same urban, public elementary school. While families' relationships with their children's schools are important at any age, in the early years of childhood they are critical. Further, the diversity of class and culture in urban, public schools adds layers of complexity to the relationships between home and school. The teachers interviewed for this study have been purposefully selected from the same school. There were two reasons for this deliberate choice. First, because it offered the opportunity to see how the teachers worked together and communicated with each other, as they shared their experiences of working with families. Second, as the school's mission included a vision for fostering strong connections between families and teachers, interviewing teachers from this particular school offered the opportunity to see the impact of school structures and culture on the teachers' work with families.

This study is significant in several ways. First, it provides documentation and analysis of the lives of teachers, whose life histories have not been adequately recorded and theorized about in the study of education. In documenting teachers' lives this study investigated how the experiences of teachers' personal lives, including their own families and their schooling, impacted on their approach to their teaching. As Goodson (1988) noted, "In understanding something so intensely personal as teaching, it is critical that we know about the person the teacher is." (p. 83) Next, this study goes beyond the current rhetoric related to parent involvement to learn more about how teachers' make sense of their experiences in their work with families. Finally, the study investigates teachers' perceptions of their professional contexts – the school they work in and the policies that impact them – to explore how these contexts shape their experiences as teachers and their relationships with their students' families. The

implications and recommendations shared in Chapter 6 contribute to an understanding of what kind of experiential learning, through teacher preparation, professional development and mentoring, can be offered to support teachers in being more effective in fostering genuine, collaborative relationships with families.

AREAS OF LITERATURE FOR REVIEW

Historical context

In order to understand the current relationship between urban, public school teachers and families, it is necessary to investigate the historical context of the school system. Throughout the history of public schools in New York City, perceptions about the role of the teacher versus the role of family in children's education have evolved. This section of the review of the literature will briefly set a context for schools of today by examining these shifts in thinking.

The beginnings

In the history of public education, the relationship between families and schools has been fraught with gaping distances, apprehension, and conflict. During the first century of American nationhood, waves of immigration added to the burgeoning population of the new country, particularly in urban centers. During the 1800s in New York City, wealthy businessmen established free schools that would become the foundation of the public school system, created to assist in the acculturation and Americanization of poor children from immigrant families. In the mass media of the time, the role of the public school was understood literally as a social filter, expressed in graphic terms by such publications as Putnam's Monthly (quoted in Tyack, 1974): "...for the effectual defecation of the stream of life in a great city, there is but one

rectifying agent – one infallible filter – the SCHOOL”” (p. 85). Education historians have documented the ways in which early public school founders, administrators, and teachers perceived their students’ families as culturally deficient and consequently incapable of participating positively in their children’s education (Tyack, 1974). Kaestle, (1983) writing a history of the Charity Schools which laid the foundation for the public school system in New York City, documented the ways in which schools that served poor, immigrant children in the late 18th and early 19th centuries viewed their mission as one of rescuing children from the perceived negative influence of their families and communities. Kaestle cited an editorial from the *New York Daily Advertiser* from 1791, in which the paper lobbied for the creation of schools to serve the urban poor on the grounds that, “the situation of many poor children ‘exposes them to innumerable temptations to become not only useless, but hurtful members of the community.’” (p. 32) The editorial reflected in strong terms the disdain and disrespect shown toward public school families during that era. Unlike students attending private schools, for whom the home and school culture were considered consonant, students who attended public schools received explicit messages that the language and culture of their home was impoverished. In order for a student to be properly educated for success in the new America, their ties to home had to be severed.

As urban school systems grew, teachers felt increasingly isolated from each other and the communities they worked with. The history of and impact of this disjuncture has been the subject of a substantial and complex body of scholarship. (Kaestle, 1983; Ravitch, 1974; Tyack, 1974). Teachers’ hectic schedules, bureaucratic obligations and even the physical plant of urban schools contributed to teachers’ stress (Rousmaniere, 1997). Under these conditions, teachers, even if they had the inclination, rarely had the capacity to reach out to the families of the children they

worked with. This lack of communication and contact exacerbated the underlying tensions between urban schools and communities throughout the 20th century in New York City and elsewhere. Families of public school children found themselves literally and figuratively pushed out the door of the school. Further, ethnic, racial, religious and cultural differences between school staff and families abounded (Markowitz, 1993; Rousmaniere, 2005). At times the tension between schools and families boiled over into explicit conflict (Ravitch, 1974).

As the system of public education evolved, the relationship between families and schools became a topic of study. In *The Sociology of Teaching*, Willard Waller (1932) characterized parents and teachers as, “natural enemies, predestined each for the discomfiture of the other” (p. 68). Waller opined that schools and families must inevitably see each other as adversaries, a fact he attributed to the differences in their perspectives and goals with respect to the children. Teachers, he explained, operated in a utilitarian fashion, thinking of the needs of the whole classroom over the needs of the individual child. Parents, on the other hand were interested in the development of their particular offspring. Additionally, according to Waller, teachers were constrained by the goals of their profession, to address only the academic achievement, “that fragment of the child” (p. 74) at the expense of all else, while parents were concerned with the development of “the whole child” (p. 74).

The 1960s and beyond

In the 1960s academics developed theories to address speculation as to why some children were succeeding in public schools while others were not. Scholars and politicians sought to explain why poor children, and particularly poor children of color, seemed to have less academic success when compared with their more affluent, white peers. In 1965 Assistant

Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan released his report on *The Negro Family, The Case for National Action*. Moynihan argued that, “Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American.” Moynihan cited E. Franklin Fraizer’s (1960) argument that,

As the result of family disorganization a large proportion of Negro children and youth have not undergone the socialization which only the family can provide. The disorganized families have failed to provide for their emotional needs and have not provided the discipline and habits which are necessary for personality development. Because the disorganized family has failed in its function as a socializing agency, it has handicapped the children in their relations to the institutions in the community. (pp. 276-277)

The rhetoric of such reports positioned the African American family strictly from a deficit perspective and went so far as to portray African American children as handicapped by the mere fact of their race. To address the impact of this “disorganization” programs such as Headstart were established in conjunction with President Johnson’s War On Poverty. Joining the political rhetoric, academics offered theories of a “culture of poverty” (Lewis, 1966) and “the disadvantaged child” (Deutsch, 1967) to explain why poor (most often African American and Hispanic/Latino) students lacked the cultural tools to succeed in school and life. Offered as condescending and sympathetic justifications to unburden poor families from the responsibility for their children’s lack of success in school, these theories employed deficit-based language to conflate the culture of non-dominant groups with a condition of being culture-less. Psychologist Martin Deutsch (1967) and his colleagues at New York University contended that “the disadvantaged child,” suffered profound psychological and cognitive damage as a result of being

raised in “the slum.” Deutsch described, in painstaking detail, how poor, urban children were deprived of the visual and verbal stimulus necessary for normal growth and development, suggesting for example that, “The lower class home is not a verbally oriented environment” (p. 48). What is more likely is that the verbal communication in those homes was unfamiliar to schools and scholars. This limited and biased view of language has subsequently been refuted through the research of well-respected linguists (Heath, 1983; Labov, 1970). Nonetheless when teachers adopted the views of politicians and scholars that certain children’s families were deficient, the impact on children entering school could only be damaging. For evidence that this stance has not changed much in the subsequent decades, one need look no further than the language used on the website of the Office of Headstart today, which refers to the families it serves as “vulnerable” and “disadvantaged” at the same time that it promises a “culturally responsive” approach. The routine use of deficit-based language to describe children and families conveniently obviates the need to examine the deficits of schools and society which also contribute to the children’s challenges in schools.

As a counterbalance to this deficit view, more recent scholarship has suggested that urban, public school teachers should be obligated to familiarize themselves with the communication modes and cultural contributions of children and their families. (Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005; Delpit, 1995; Dyson, 2003; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992; Perry, Steele, & Hillard, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Reflecting on different approaches to the teaching of writing, Delpit (1995) offered the following insight, “It has begun to dawn on me that many of the teachers of black children have their roots in other communities and do not often have the opportunity to hear the full range of their students’ voices” (p. 17). Throughout the history of public schools in America, elementary school teachers have mostly

been white, middle class women. This trend continues today. According to the most recent analysis of demographic data available from the National Education Association (2010),

In 2006, 87 percent of all teachers were Caucasian/white, 6 percent black/African-American, 1 percent Asian, 1 percent American Indian/Alaska Native, 3 percent multiracial, and 3 percent other. Of the respondents who indicated they were multiracial, the largest group selected both Caucasian/white and American Indian/Alaska Native.

Four percent of all teachers reported being of Hispanic origin. (p. 109)

Though, for some reason, it appears to be very difficult to locate demographic data for teachers working in the New York City public school system, the NEA's report offered some comparison in the difference in the population of teachers working in large, urban school districts nationwide versus smaller ones. Their study found that,

Large school districts were more diverse, in that black/African-American teachers and Asian teachers were more than three times as prevalent there (14%) as in medium or small systems (4% and 1%, respectively). All other racial categories also were more prevalent in large systems, though some multiracial categories were more common in middle-sized and/or small systems. Teachers of Hispanic origin were more likely to be in large school systems (7%), followed by medium and small systems (4% and 2%, respectively) (p. 109)

A large percentage of urban, public students today are from families of low socio-economic status, many of whom are African American, Hispanic/Latino, and immigrants from developing countries. Demographic data on New York City's public school students is much more readily available. According to the annual report of the Independent Budget Office (2011), of New York City's 1,093,151 public school students in 2009-2010, 14.9% were identified as Asian, 39.3%

were Hispanic, 29.9% were Black, 14.3% were White, 0.7% identified as Mixed Race, and 0.4% as American Indian. Additionally, the study showed that only 60.6% of New York City public school families reported English as the language most commonly spoken at home, with fourteen other languages represented from Spanish at 23.1%, to Russian (1.4%), to Punjabi (0.4%). Comparing the demographic data of urban teachers and students, these statistics suggest that many urban, public school teachers, still find themselves teaching children who are different from them in a variety of ways.

The small schools movement

The first wave of the small schools movement emerged out of the context of the mid-century, deficit-based perspective on public school children. In the 1970s in New York City and elsewhere, educators with a social justice orientation began to establish small, alternative, public schools, that would serve the diverse populations of the five boroughs (Meier, 1995; Semel & Sadovnik, 2008). Grounded in the progressive philosophy of John Dewey (1959) these schools offered a student-centered curriculum and articulated a desire to include the culture and language of their diverse student populations in classroom practice. In the past, progressive pedagogy had been mainly the province of independent schools, serving mostly white, middle and upper class families (Sadovnik & Semel, 2002; Semel, & Sadovnik, 1999). Educators leading the small schools movement of the 1960s and 70s believed that *all* children could and should benefit from seeing their knowledge and interests validated through the use of a student-centered approach to curriculum and pedagogy. Additionally, small schools educators sought to see their students more holistically, and described practices intended to engage with children and their families in respectful collaboration (Ayers, 2001; Carini, 2001; Himley, & Carini, 2000; Weber, 1997). At

many of these schools, educators worked directly with families to create the blueprints for the new schools that would serve their communities. Describing the process of establishing one of the first of such small schools in New York City, Central Park East founder Debbie Meier (1995) wrote,

...we knew that good early childhood education requires authentic forms of collaboration between the school and the family. This is a matter not only of political principle but also of educational practicality, and it motivated us from the start to work hard to build a family-oriented school. (p. 23)

Planning teams for the early small schools movement involved teachers, administrators, and families in envisioning schools that would *serve and be served by* the community.

Progressive Pedagogy & Descriptive Inquiry

Teachers work with children and families in the context of the larger system of public education but also within the specific context of the school. Through mentoring, professional development and institutional structures, schools play a large role in influencing the ways that teachers approach their work with families. This section of the literature review will describe the context of progressive schools and some of their particular approaches to curriculum and pedagogy.

Progressive pedagogy

During the course of American public education, debates about the most meaningful and efficacious way to educate children have resulted in wild swings of the education reform pendulum (Kleibard, 2004; Ravitch, 1983). Teachers, administrators, parents, philosophers,

sociologists, and politicians have all weighed in on what they believe to be the most just and effective way to promote teaching and learning. These often dissenting views have resulted in myriad educational reforms, enacted at a variety of educational institutions, which have served the diverse populations of young learners in this country.

Throughout their history, most urban, public schools have employed a teacher-centered, pedagogic model, one that conceives of the teacher holding all the knowledge, which is then dispensed to the students through rote learning and skill building drills (Tyack, 1974). This teacher-centric approach to education has been criticized as an oppressive tool for reproduction of the social order (Friere, 1970; Giroux & Purpel, 1983). Criticism of this traditional approach includes that it fails to recognize and validate the knowledge and interests of the learner. Additionally this approach yields students who may be obedient but who may not be meaningfully engaged in their education. Because most often the students who receive this type of instruction are poor and students of color, scholarly critique of this method has identified it as an issue of social justice and equality.

In the history of independent schools, a different model of education often prevailed (Sadovnik & Semel, 2002; Semel, & Sadovnik, 1999). Drawing on the educational philosophy of John Dewey (1959), these schools developed a range of practices that fell under the umbrella term “progressive education” in which teaching and learning drew on the natural curiosity, knowledge and interests of the students. In progressive classrooms, students were given autonomy to choose and direct their own path to learning. Opportunities for hands-on, experiential learning were offered frequently, so that students were able to engage deeply with subjects and materials. Interdisciplinary learning was the norm, and subjects were not segregated from each other. Learning took place through longitudinal exploration rather than lessons timed

by the school bell (Dewey, 1959; Semel, 1992). In contrast to the teacher-centric approach of the public schools, the progressive model required a redistribution of power in the classroom. Students were more autonomous, empowered, and considered responsible for building their knowledge. Despite criticism to the contrary, the progressive model did not result in a diminished role for the teacher but rather required teachers to think of themselves as active and involved facilitators of student learning. For many decades the progressive model thrived mostly in the independent schools.

Within this spectrum of educational philosophy, the public system did, on occasion, swing more toward the student-centered approach to curriculum and pedagogy (Kleibard, 2004). However, because they held deficit views about the capacities of the children served by the public system, most education policy makers and school administrators believed that public school children would not benefit from a student-centered approach. Thus the teacher-centric model was the norm. However, in the 1960s and 70s in New York City and other urban areas, educators formed into networks of teachers working to bring the progressive model into the public school system (Weber, 1997). These teachers thought of teaching in the public schools as extension of their political activism and work for social justice (Markowitz, 1993; Meier, 1995). They sought to teach and learn alongside the diverse community of learners in the public system using a pedagogical model that would treat their students with respect for their capacity as knowledge makers.

Descriptive inquiry

In addition to the curricular focus on a more active, empowered role for the learner, progressive pedagogy also emphasized a new role for teachers in developing holistic knowledge

of their students. In order to generate complex portraits of the learners in their classrooms, progressive educators developed strategies for looking closely at children and their work. In 1916 Lucy Sprague Mitchell founded the Bureau of Educational Experiments (BEE). Mitchell asserted that teachers' work should be grounded in the knowledge gathered through close observations of children (Antler, 1987). Such a practice of *child study* would offer the teacher insight into each individual child's process for learning, and, further, such deep knowledge of children would inform the field of education. The child study movement in education sparked the development of a range of approaches to observing and documenting children and their learning. One notable example of such processes is the practice of *descriptive inquiry* (Carini, 2001; Himley, & Carini, 2000). Though developed in a rural setting, the descriptive processes articulated by Patricia Carini in her work at the Prospect School in Vermont have been cited as having relevance and utility for progressive educators working at urban, public schools (Ayers, 2001; Diamond, 2008; Meier, 1995; Weber, 1997). Drawing on the hermeneutic phenomenology of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), Carini developed a method that employed close observation and description of children and their work. Through descriptive inquiry, parents and teachers were encouraged to hold aside their tendency to rush to judgment in interpreting children's behavior and actions. Instead they remained focused on the act of describing richly and specifically the empirical evidence of what children make and say and do. These descriptions provided data that parents and teachers could use to frame discussions about how they might better support young learners.

For approximately the past forty years, a network of progressive educators, working in a variety of settings across the country, have met regularly in teacher study groups, framing their work together using the processes of descriptive inquiry. Many of the educators involved in the

small schools movement in New York City grounded their teaching practice in the descriptive processes (Cruz-Acosta, In press; Meier, 1995; Weber, 1997). For the purposes of this study, Carini's perspective on working with families is instructive. In her writings Carini encouraged parents and teachers to gain power together by considering themselves as logical collaborators who "share the responsibility for educating children... [because] often teachers' and parents' knowledge of children is neither recognized nor valued" (Carini, 2000, p. 56). Extending the progressive model, which redistributed power within the classroom, Carini encouraged a redistribution of power in the relationship between teachers and families.

Through engaging with the work of descriptive inquiry, teachers involved with the Prospect Center participated in processes designed to support them in approaching their work with children and families from a strength-based perspective. This work had a strong philosophical and political grounding. Writing in the introduction to the revised edition of *Prospect's Descriptive Processes* (Strieb, et al, 2011) Himley asserted, "Especially now, in this time of high stakes testing, accountability, and enforced standardization, we as educators must ensure that education starts and builds from the strengths of children and teachers and values human capacity, understood as widely distributed" (p. 5). Educators who used the descriptive processes to frame their thinking about children and families believed that this work would enable them to resist the increasingly narrow view of what it means to teach and learn. Taking this descriptive stance, the teachers worked from a belief that all people, children and adults, are understood as striving to make sense of the world. Structured around a process of collaborative knowledge making, the descriptive processes equalized the contributions of all participants, both new and more veteran teachers, families, and school administrators. This enabled each person to offer the particularity of their perspective and their strengths. Given the rich and varied history of

progressive education, this holistic and inclusive view of children, families, teaching, and learning was not exclusive to the teachers participating in Prospect's descriptive processes. Many of the early participants in Prospect's processes had been introduced to this work through a variety of progressive networks. For the purpose of this study, however, which focused on teachers at a school who had been active in the work of the Prospect Center, the particular practices of Prospect's descriptive process require further explication.

In order to familiarize teachers with the processes of descriptive inquiry, the Prospect Center offered a self-published handbook titled *Prospect's Descriptive Processes*, originally assembled in 2002 and offered as a revised edition by Strieb, Carini, Kanevsky & Wice in 2011. This handbook articulated the processes and roles to be taken by participants in a variety of processes of descriptive inquiry. Two basic practices of Prospect's descriptive processes included the process of *reflecting on a word* and the process of *sharing a recollection*. In all of the descriptive processes, participants gathered in a circle, and attention was paid to insuring that each person had the opportunity to share. Discussions were facilitated by a chair who periodically paused to provide an integrative restatement or summary of the themes, contradictions, and questions that may have emerged. The chair or another note taker who was often also responsible for documenting the discussion with notes. The process of reflecting on a word allowed participants to collaboratively articulate understandings of a word that was chosen for its strong or particular associations with the work at hand. To begin this process, participants spent a brief time jotting down understandings, definitions, and associations with the chosen word. These notes were then shared by each participant in turn around the circle. The threads that emerged from this expanded process of understanding of the key word were summarized and restated by the chair and provided a foundation for the work to come. The process of reflecting

on a word highlighted the mindful and attentive stance toward language that was central to the process of descriptive inquiry.

A second, frequently used practice in the descriptive processes was the sharing of autobiographical recollections. To prepare for this process participants were provided with a set of written guidelines, often in advance of meeting, that were intended to help to frame their description of an experience from their own lives, e.g. a recollection of childhood play, or a recollection of one's participation in a process of change. These guidelines often included a series of questions intended to elicit specific and particular details, and concluded by asking the storyteller to reflect on how this recollection shaped their thinking about the issue being explored over time. As Carini (in Strieb, et al, 2011) explained, the goal of the sharing of recollections in the context of the work of descriptive inquiry was to provide,

... A usual starting place, for when we take time to recall and share experiences that had a shaping effect on our own learning (or that helped shape our ways of seeing the world, or that connected us with values that widened our horizons), when we recall and share play that absorbed us in childhood, our perceptions of these inherently human experiences, attune us to their meaning in children's lives. Our capacities for observation are honed and expanded (p. 58).

For educators participating in descriptive inquiry, the history of each person's own life was seen as a necessary starting place for reflecting on one's work in the present. Additionally, by attending to the variety of experiences and understandings of teachers' lives, the process of sharing of recollections pointed to the importance of appreciating the notion of "human capacity, widely distributed". The complexity, variation, and contradictions inherent in any group of

shared recollections only served to broaden participants' understanding of human experience. Reflecting on the expansive capacity of these processes, Carini (in Strieb, et al, 2011) wrote,

It is moving to hear stories that all bear on a common experience. The differences and complementarities give voice to the diversity of our humanness and to our common human ground. We are all story weavers and tellers. We all recognize the sustaining and healing and hurting power of story. To appropriate or tell someone else's story -- to claim another's experience as one's own -- is a gross betrayal of trust. To hear another's story with open heart and mind, to receive it as a gift, uplifts both teller and the one honored to hear it. To hear one story is to be reminded of others, a spiraling of stories spinning across centuries, and through them, to catch glimpses of the complexities, time immemorial, of living a human life. (p. 60)

Central to the process of sharing recollections was an emphasis on confidentiality and respect among all participants in the process, which would be emphasized throughout the process by the person responsible for chairing the work.

The work of descriptive inquiry offered teachers a variety of processes for looking closely at the learners in their lives and their own teaching practice. Two descriptive processes that especially informed the work addressed in this dissertation were the *Descriptive Review of a Child* and the *Descriptive Review of Teaching Practice*. (Though the terms child and children are used here, these processes could be applied to observation of a child or adolescent of any age from birth up.) The descriptive processes also offered guidelines for observing and describing children's work, the life of a school, an issue in education, and to performing a close reading of theoretical texts, archival documents, or the language of educational standards. Though

important processes, these practices will not be explored in depth here. All of these processes were articulated in much greater detail in *Prospect's Descriptive Processes* (Strieb, et al, 2011).

For the Descriptive Review of the Child, a teacher gathered observations over time of one child and produced a narrative description of the child to be shared with a group of colleagues. The organization of this narrative description was framed by five headings that included the child's physical presence and gesture, disposition and temperament, connections with other people, strong interests and preferences, and modes of thinking and learning. To guide their observations and description the teacher could refer to Carini's "A Letter to Parents and Teachers on Some Ways of Looking at and Reflecting on Children" (in Himley & Carini, 2000.) In this piece, Carini offered parents and teachers suggestions for ways to develop the narrative description of the child and, further, oriented the observer toward a particular stance toward children and their learning. Closing her "letter" with a warm personal address Carini mused,

I find this kind of recollecting of children refreshing and renewing of my faith in our human-ness. I hope you will too. It is always easy to criticize and find fault with children (or other adults), to point out what they can't do and how problematic they are. It takes more time and patience to paint a fuller picture in which the person is understood to be not the sum of unchanging traits but in process, in the making. Understood as active and open-ended, each of us is at any moment in our lives, and in all taken together, a complex blend of failings and virtues, of strengths and vulnerabilities (2000, p. 19).

Especially for teachers new to the descriptive processes, their work was supported by the guidance of an assigned *chair*. The role of the chair might be to help the teacher elicit and organize their narrative description. The chair would also take an active role in the process of sharing the work in a circle of colleagues. While the Descriptive Review of a Child may have

begun as a written narrative or outline of observations, this static document would not represent the fullness of the process. As a next step the presenting teacher would offer their description of the child to a group of colleagues. At schools that used the descriptive processes as a form of professional development the review might be shared with a group of colleagues who likely already had some knowledge of and contact with the child. In some cases the child's family was invited to participate in the process as well. In other settings, such as the conferences and institutes of the Prospect Center and the Institutes for Descriptive Inquiry, the review might be presented to a diverse group of colleagues who did not have direct knowledge of the child, including future and current teachers, other school professionals such as school counselors, administrators, or support staff, teacher educators, or retired teachers. The goal of the review in both cases was to generate feedback for presenting teacher to take back into their work with children and families.

In order to produce recommendations that would address the presenting teacher's needs and questions, the process of sharing the Descriptive Review followed a loosely set structure. The review would often begin by having all participants reflect on a key word, that had emerged from the teacher's process of preparing to describe the child (e.g. quiet, enough, or visible.) To frame the work of the review, the presenting teacher would articulate a *focusing question*, which would be revisited throughout the presentation as a way of guiding the participants' in listening and responding to the description of the child. It was critical that the focusing question not be oriented toward changing or "fixing" the child, but to offer the presenting teacher and participants a way to frame their responses toward strategies for supporting the learner. As the review closed, both the presenting teacher and participants in the review came away with a deeper, though always partial, understanding of the particular child that was the focus of the

review but also on other children, childhood, teaching, and learning.

Related to the process of the Descriptive Review of the Child, teachers could also reflect on their own process of teaching through the Descriptive Review of Practice. A Descriptive Review of Practice shared many processes integral to the Descriptive Review of the Child. These included; the role of the chair, the use of a focusing question to guide the work, the general practice of sharing thoughts around a circle, and the reflection on a word. As Kanevsky & Strieb (in Strieb, et al, 2011) explained,

The primary purpose of this Descriptive Review of Practice is to offer the teacher an opportunity to describe and reflect on her current work within the context of her personal history, her early visions and goals for herself, and the possible constraints she faces in fulfilling these goals in her current setting. (p. 53)

To engage in a Descriptive Review of Practice the participating teacher identified an area of their practice that they wished to explore. The topic may have been an aspect of curriculum (e.g. how the teacher worked to develop emergent science curriculum) or a classroom based practice (e.g. the process for conflict resolution in the class) or possibly a school-based issue (e.g. how students' diverse cultures were incorporated into the curriculum school-wide.) The presenting teacher worked with the chair to identify a focusing question that would help guide participants' listening and responses to their presentation. The review often began with the teacher describing their understandings of their role as a teacher, including their reflection on "how teaching was chosen as a work; important influences (positive and negative) on the teacher's philosophy, practice, and personal growth; values or thought important to one's self from its sources in childhood or adolescence" (Strieb et al, 2011, p. 53). The teacher then shared aspects of their practice relevant to the focus of the review. This may have included documents,

such as a class map, schedule, and other artifacts from the classroom, student work, and a description of activities. The presentation also included the teacher's reflection on these aspects of their practice, which involved articulating challenges and successes, as well as aspirations for places where the teaching and learning could grow. If the review was attended by the presenting teacher's colleagues, they may have joined in the description with reflections of their own. Once the presenting teacher laid out these aspects to consider, participants were offered the opportunity to ask a round of clarifying questions. This round was followed by the participants' responses and suggestions, which attended to the presenting teacher's focusing question. As Kanevsky and Strieb explained these recommendations might have come in the form of "Questions and ideas, and/or thinkers and other practitioners that spark the teacher's imagination" (Strieb et al, 2011, p. 54). At various points throughout the process, as with the Descriptive Review of the Child, the chair took notes and facilitated the transitions between sections of the review. As the review closed both the presenting teacher and the participants come away with a deepened understanding of the issues at the center of the review as well as ongoing questions and approaches to take back into their teaching practice. Paired together, and in conjunction with other processes of descriptive inquiry, the Descriptive Review of the Child and the Descriptive Review of Practice offered teachers generative structures that supported them in the growth of their teaching and learning. As a final note on the descriptive processes, it is important to acknowledge that these are living processes that have evolved according to the needs and orientation of the participants, and that some of these adaptations have been hotly debated within the community of educators who ground their work in these processes.

Typologies & Understandings of Family Engagement

Before we can begin to investigate strategies teachers use to cultivate genuine, collaborative relationships with families, it is necessary first to explore the range of understandings and definitions teachers have of family engagement. This section of the review of the literature will begin by citing a representative sample of research on the effects of parental involvement on children's achievement in schools. In these cases, parental involvement is defined specifically as support of their own children's academic work. The review of the literature will continue by identifying the scholarship on a broader perspective toward the role that families play in children's education. Scholarship in this area suggests that when teachers hold more holistic views of family engagement they are better prepared to foster genuine, collaborative relationships with families.

The traditional view of parental involvement

In studying the issue of parental involvement, the field of educational research has often focused its lens on the impact that parents play in children's success at school. In a compendium of recent research on the subject, Henderson & Mapp (2002) identified the benefits that have been demonstrated when parents are involved in a variety of ways in children's schooling including:

- higher grade point averages and scores on standardized tests or rating scales,
- more classes passed and credits earned,
- better attendance,
- improved behavior at home and at school,
- better social skills and adaptation to school. (p. 24)

One way that parental involvement is manifested and measured is at the level of parental participation in aiding their children in their schoolwork at home. Not surprisingly, research has

found that when parents are more engaged in homework help, students' show greater levels of academic achievement (Bailey, 2006; Clark, 1993). Additional research on parental involvement has measured the following: how parental aspirations for their children's educational attainment effect student success (Fan & Chen, 1999); how parents' general interest in the emotional and cognitive growth of their children correlated to greater academic success for the students (Mo & Singh, 2008); and how the transfer of a strong family work ethic yields positive results for young students (Lopez, 2001).

An ecological view of family engagement

While much education research on parental involvement limits the definition of involvement to helping one's own child in their academic work, additional scholarship on the topic has sought to expand the definition of family engagement to include a more holistic typology. In order to understand the multiple realms in which families participate in children's education, one must first understand that children's development is enacted on multiple stages. Rather than focus exclusively on children's identity in school, an ecological approach to child development encourages us to think of children as existing in multiple spheres – from home to school to the larger community – and to understand that each realm has its own culture and role to play in fostering children's growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

This theory of the ecology of childhood has informed recent scholarship on family engagement. At the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships of Johns Hopkins University, Joyce L. Epstein has spent years gathering research on the relationship between families and schools. Epstein and her colleagues have worked to articulate the range of ways that families can be involved in their children's schools and have identified a typology of parental

involvement (Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Dauber, 1991) which run the spectrum from the micro to the macro, including: providing basic care and parenting at home; volunteering in the classroom or school; participating in school governance and decision making; advocacy and community organizing on behalf of schools. Additional scholarship on the subject reinforces the notion that children's education is not limited to the activities of the school and offers teachers an inducement to think about how to structure this collaborative relationship productively (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

This more expansive vision of family engagement gives teachers a language and a structure for recognizing the range of ways that families participate in children's education, broadening the definition beyond homework help and chaperoning school trips. This elaboration is important on many levels. It challenges teachers' beliefs that families who do not participate visibly (e.g. by volunteering at bake sales) are any less invested and involved in their children's education (Henderson, Davies, Johnson, & Mapp, 2007; Lopez, 2001; Peña, 2001; Valdes, 1996). Additionally, this more expansive view of family engagement calls attention to the fact that the types of parental involvement that many teachers have recognized and valued may be enabled by the circumstances of families of higher socio-economic status. To date, the common definition of parental involvement in schools has been limited to the kind of volunteer work that is only possible only for middle and upper middle class parents, most often mothers, whose flexible work schedules and level of education permit a particular type of participation (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Reay, 1998). This limited definition of family engagement has ignored the role that other families play. A broader typology enables teachers to recognize that all families are capable of being invested and involved in their children's education.

The ecological view in practice

Enabled by this broader definition of family engagement, teachers are encouraged to develop strategies for cultivating the relationship between home and school. Within the classroom, the use of culturally responsive pedagogy draws on children's home language and culture in curriculum and instruction (Ayers, 2001; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Dyson, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Laureau, 2000; Lareau, 2003; Perry, Steele, & Hillard, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This approach validates and recognizes that children grow, learn and think outside the classroom and develops a more explicit bridge between home and school learning. Additional scholarship has challenged a deficit view of families who have lower levels of education, recognizing that these families make valuable contributions to their children's education, including thorough the transmission of cultural values that encourage hard work and educational attainment (Lopez, 2001; Mo & Singh, 2008). Related research recommends specific strategies for teachers in developing a practice of home visits with families to identify the "funds of knowledge" that exist within poor, immigrant families, and to envision ways that this knowledge can be brought into the classroom curriculum (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzales, 1992).

Challenges to Family Engagement

Despite scholarship and pedagogical practices that encourage teachers to recognize the role that families play in children's education, many teachers still face challenges in cultivating genuine, collaborative relationships between home and school. Rather than acknowledging and working with the capacities that families bring to their children's education, some teachers have difficulty valuing families' contributions, particularly when differences of class, race, language,

and gender are involved. This section of the literature review will describe research on how these challenges have been manifested and theories that attempt to explain these dynamics.

The emotional landscape of teaching

To begin with, teaching itself has been described as an emotional practice (Day & Leitch, 2001; Hargreaves, 1998). While teachers must operate with professionalism and boundaries, the process of knowing and caring for the learners in one's classroom is a profoundly human activity. The act of teaching requires teachers to become emotionally involved with their work in a way that might not be required of workers in other professions. This emotional investment is evidenced as well in the relationship between parents and teachers. Communication and interaction, or lack thereof, between teachers and families is laden with beliefs and attitudes formed by both parties through the course of the life experiences, both in and out of school. Differences in class, culture, and positive and negative educational experiences all contribute to how each views the other and shapes expectations of the type of discourse that might be possible between teachers and families (Lasky, 2000; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

Issues related to race, ethnicity, and language

Beliefs and perceptions influenced by race and ethnicity are an important aspect of the relationship between home and school. Research on the correlation between teacher's self-assessment of their relationships with their students' families and the academic expectations they hold for their students have yielded disturbing results. One study found disturbing patterns in the attitudes that a sample of mostly white teachers held toward families of their same race versus families of a different race. The study concluded that the teachers had correspondingly lower

aspirations for children from families who were of a different race, particularly African Americans (Hughes, Gleason & Zhang, 2005). Though the demographics of the pool of elementary school teachers in America are slowly shifting, it remains a profession of mostly white women. As the population of public school children grows in racial and ethnic diversity, the findings of such research are especially troubling. As teachers perceive families who are different from them to be harder to forge relationships with, the inevitable impact on many children's school experiences could be deleterious.

Additional research on the relationship between home and school found that families' beliefs about teachers and teaching influence the role they see for themselves with respect to their children's education. Though researchers have found that families in many Latin American immigrant communities hold high aspirations for their children's education, many of these families believe that the primary responsibility for educating their children lies with the school. Additionally, immigrant families' limited experience with the American system of education may lead them to take a less active or visible role in their children's school. This can lead teachers to conclude that these families are less invested in their children's education (Lopez, 2001; Peña, 2001; Valdes, 1996).

For immigrant families who speak languages other than English, having their children in classrooms with teachers who speak only English can compound this challenge. Language policies in most American schools favor English and frame speakers of other languages as deficient by, for example, labeling these students as English Language Learners rather than a more strength-based orientation, which would refer to them as Emergent Bilinguals (García, 2009). These policies and practices exacerbate the distance felt between home and school. Teachers' own language practices and attitudes toward students' home language can have a great

impact on their capacity to cultivate relationships with families (Lee & Oxelson, 2006). Children who are forced to assimilate to school by losing fluency with their home language may feel that their ties to family and community are being severed (Zentella, 1997). Teachers may be more successful at developing strategies for cultivating genuine, collaborative relationships with families who speak languages other than English when they are able to recognize the barriers that immigrant families perceive, that prevent them from becoming more actively involved in their children's schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Valdes, 1996).

Issues related to class and communication

Differences of socio-economic status (SES) also play a role in the relationship between families and schools. In multiple studies on the influence of class on the home-school relationship, researchers have concluded that families of different SES understand their relationship to their children's schooling differently. As with the studies of Latin American immigrant groups cited above, researchers have found that both poor white and African American families, while equally concerned with providing their children with a good education as their higher SES counterparts, do not envision as active and visible a role for themselves in participating in their children's education (Lareau, 1987, 2000, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Conversely, families of higher SES perceive themselves as having a more active role to play in their children's education and will leverage their social and cultural capital in the interest of supporting their children's academic success (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2003; Sheldon, 2002).

Much scholarship on the role of class in education employs Pierre Bourdieu's theories to explain why families of different classes may feel more or less empowered to be actively involved in their children's education (Bourdieu, 1977; Swartz, 1997). In his work, Bourdieu suggested that each individual is socialized to feel a sense of comfort and capacity, or *habitus*, when operating in a milieu of a familiar context, or *field*. Bourdieu's contribution to the analysis of education suggested that families of higher SES feel more comfortable and capable of participating in and enacting their wishes in schools where the culture and language of that context is more familiar to them. Whatever the explanation, these differences in levels of overt participation and empowerment by families of different classes can result in teachers holding correspondingly different views of the level of investment and involvement by families in their children's education. As a result, teachers may behave with less sense of accountability to lower SES families and perhaps hold lower aspirations for their poorer students.

As communication is at the heart of the relationship between teachers and families, the work of Bernstein, Baldwin, and Heath may illuminate an understanding of how families and their modes of communication are received by teachers and schools. Bernstein's early, controversial work on communication codes (1971) compared language use of middle class and working class people to explain why working class, British children seemed to have less academic success in school. According to Bernstein, middle class people spoke in an *elaborated* mode in which everything that the listener needed to understand and participate in the discourse is included in the language of the speaker. Bernstein explained, "This speech mode facilitates the verbal elaboration of subjective intent, sensitivity to the implications of separateness and difference, and points to the possibilities inherent in a complex conceptual hierarchy for the organization of experience." (1971, p. 61) In contrast, Bernstein characterized the speech of

working class people as *restricted* to describe language use that employs verbal shortcuts and inside references, which prevent those outside the speaker's social class to participate in the discourse. Restricted codes are employed by intimates – family, friends and social class peers – whose language use underscores a connection between speakers. Though Bernstein suggested that restricted codes are used primarily by working class speakers, he acknowledged that people of all classes use restricted codes in certain circumstances.

James Baldwin, in his 1979 essay “If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” offered a different perspective on the topic of communication codes. Baldwin described the history of the development of Black English, a language that enabled African slaves originating from many tribes and speaking many languages to communicate rapidly to each other, while simultaneously preventing American slave owners from following their discourse. As Baldwin wrote, “A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey.” (p. 455) Following Baldwin's argument, language use that Bernstein characterized as *restricted* might in fact be understood of as codes of *resistance*.

Responding to criticism from the left that his work was grounded in deficit based thinking about working class language, in the second edition of *Class, Codes and Control: Volume 1*, Bernstein acknowledged, “I was responsible, by omission, for failing to draw attention to the material poverty under which communities were forced to live, and for failing to draw attention to the conditions in schools which were responsible for educational failure.” (1974, p. 19) Unfortunately the controversy over, or, what Bernstein characterized as “misrecognition” (1996) of his work, resulted in many scholars dismissing Bernstein's subsequent contributions to the study of curriculum and pedagogy (1975; 1996). In this later work, Bernstein introduced a

schema for understanding how teachers use more or less explicit *classification* and *framing* to produce pedagogies that he identified as *visible* or *invisible*. Further, he argued that when the communication codes of the dominant class are valorized as the sanctioned language of the classroom, some students will inevitably feel themselves left out of the discourse. Bernstein described this inequity in the following terms, “Inasmuch as some children recognize the distinguishing features of the school, relative to the children who do not, those that do are in a more powerful position with respect to the school.” (1996, p. 104). His concern with a hierarchy of communication codes in society was that it impacted whose voice was recognized and whose would be silenced in the context of schools. Using the metaphor of the school as a mirror for society, Bernstein expressed his concern that,

The school metaphorically holds up a mirror in which an image is reflected. There may be several possible images, positive and negative. A school’s ideology may be seen as a construction in a mirror through which images are reflected. The question is: who recognizes themselves as of value? What other images are excluded by the dominant image of value so that some students are unable to recognize themselves? In the same way, we can ask about the acoustic of the school. Whose voice is heard? Who is speaking? Who is hailed by this voice? For whom is it familiar? (1996, p. xxi)

Whether Bernstein’s work reproduces a deficit-based stance toward working class speakers or has been misrecognized as such, his theories of communication codes and their impact on schools offers an important theoretical lens through which to consider the communication that establishes the foundation of the relationship between teachers and families.

Heath’s seminal 1983 study *Ways With Words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms* offered another view on differences in language use. In her ten year

ethnographic study of three different communities in the Piedmont region of the Carolinas, Heath described with great richness and detail the language use two semi-rural working class communities, one white and one black, and one small-urban, middle class community that included both blacks and whites. Heath concluded that the language use and values around language in these communities was indeed different, but she did not characterize one as superior. In comparing the language use in both working class communities she wrote,

In both Roadville and Trackton, all physiologically normal children learn to talk; yet the social and linguistic environments which surround young children as they grow into their language competence differ strikingly in a number of features. These include: the boundaries of the physical and social communities in which communication to and by children is possible; the limits and features of the situations in which talk occurs; the what, how and why of patterns of choice which children can exercise in their uses of language and the values these choices of language have for the children in their communities and beyond. (p. 144)

Throughout her work, Heath characterized the language use of working class families of both races as different, yet not inferior to middle class language use. Working longitudinally, she was able to tease out subtle distinctions in the two communities values around language use, differences that may have explained the children's experiences in schools without taking a deficit perspective on their language. For example, Heath described the challenges that children from the working class black community faced in school when asked to engage with the middle class teachers' language use. Having been raised in families by adults did not modify their speech when communicating with children, the children from this community were perplexed as to why their teachers might, for example, ask them to respond a question to which they clearly already

knew the answer. With this example and many others, Heath explained some of the challenges that working class children faced when dealing with the language use of their middle class teachers. In contrast to Bernstein, she was able to do this without characterizing the children's language as inferior or impoverished.

When schools perceive families to be lacking in their capacity to support their children's education they develop programs to foster parental involvement that include academic remediation and address parenting issues. Some scholars have cautioned that often in such cases, programs aimed at poor and working class families are part of an effort to standardize a model of parenting based on the practices of the middle class. Edwards and Warin (1999) concluded that often when parental involvement programs are promoted "a form of colonization rather than collaboration is at work" (p. 332). Some families may indeed desire or require additional support to strengthen their capacity to be more involved with their children's schoolwork. Yet when schools and teachers view families exclusively through a deficit lens it may be difficult for genuine, collaborative relationships to take hold.

Issues related to gender

One final piece that is critical to understanding the relationship between school and home are the politics of gender. While the language of parent/teacher and school/family are non-gender specific, in reality, the relationship between home and school is most often a relationship between women, the female teacher and the mother. This is particularly true in the elementary school setting. While these women may be different from each other in race and class, they share the experience of being second-class citizens in society. In the history of American, public education, most teachers have been women, working in positions where they were supervised by

better-paid men (Blount, 1998; Markowitz, 1993; Rousmaniere, 1997, Tyack & Hansot, 1982). In the history of families, most of the work of childrearing has fallen to mothers, who often have less power and capital in the family than fathers. As women have entered the workforce in greater numbers, the job of caring for children has continued to fall heavier on women, even when their workload outside the house matches or exceeds that of their husbands. Recent scholarship has examined and problematized the reality that in order for schools to function well they must rely on the unpaid and unrecognized contributions of mothers. Mothers carry this burden and schools blame them, not fathers, when families do not meet the expectations of the school (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Reay, 1998). Thus the dynamic of the relationship between school and home may be understood as a relationship of two women, each overworked and underpaid, neither of whom has ultimate power over the circumstances of their situation.

Teacher autonomy

While in many instances, teachers could do more to reflect on the ways their perceptions of their students' families impacts their approach to working with those families, it is also critical that teachers be permitted to maintain their professional sense of autonomy and authority over their practice. Historically, there have been efforts to disempower teachers from having authority over their practice, particularly because teaching has been largely a profession of women (Ravitch, 1974; Rousmaniere, 1997; Tyack, 1974; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). While efforts to foster genuine, collaborative relationships may require that teachers be willing to cede some power to families (Evans, 2005) others caution that teachers be mindful that parental involvement mandates do not mask a threat to teacher autonomy (Casanova, 1996).

The study of teachers' lives

In mainstream film and literature, portraits of teachers' lives rarely leave the school building. Teachers are depicted working with students in the classroom, decompressing with colleagues in the teachers' lounge, facing supervision at the hand of an unsympathetic principal. Relatively recent movies such as *Stand and Deliver* (Musca & Menéndez, 1988), *Dangerous Minds* (Bruckheimer, Simpson & Smith, 1995), and *Freedom Writers* (Devito, Shamberg, Sher & Lagravenese 2007) have focused on the heroism of the lone teacher turning around a classroom of "difficult" kids. With the exception of *Stand and Deliver* the teachers in these movies are white women, and in all cases the "difficult" kids are predominately African American and Latino. The trope of this genre was ubiquitous enough to spawn parody, such as Mad TV's skit *Nice White Lady* (MadTV, 2007). These stories rarely include any analysis of the role of class, race, and gender in the relationship of teachers to their work. Stories that capture the full breadth and complexity of teachers' lives have not been adequately documented. Most teachers' lives have been consumed with the act of teaching, which rarely affords them the opportunity to document their lives and work. This section will review the literature of the study of teachers' lives that have been documented.

There is little historical record of the lives of teachers in the past century. Education historians seeking to document the lives of teachers have had to rely on scanty documentation, records on file with Boards of Education, and interviews with the few living teachers that worked in the first half of the 20th century (Fields, 1985; Markowitz, 1993; Rousmaniere, 1997; Weiler, 1998). More substantial biographies of educators from the past two hundred years focused mostly on women, and a few men, who left the classroom for positions of greater power as school directors and principals, professors of education, and system wide superintendents

(Blount, 1998; Chase, 1995; Hauser, 2006; Null, 2007; Patri, 1917; Rousmaniere, 2005; Sadovnik & Semel, 2002; Wallace, 2006).

Scholarship that described the work and lives of contemporary teachers has explored a range of issues. Educator memoirs have addressed subjects ranging from teachers' commitments to progressive pedagogy (Weber, 1997), to a holistic view of childhood as enacted in the classroom (Diamond, 2008), to the experiences of white teachers working with diverse populations (Ashton-Warner, 1963; Ayers, 2001; Michie, 1999; Paley, 1979). Education researchers have attempted to document and analyze the practices of teachers who have success at working with poor children and African American and Latino children (Ayers & Ford, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994). In the examples above, however, little was offered about the out-of-school life histories of the teachers. Foster's (1997) anthology of the lives of African American teachers working from the 1940s forward provided a powerful collection of teachers' lives in their own words. Casey (1993) collected life histories of Catholic, Jewish, and African American women teachers who worked explicitly toward social justice issues in their teaching, comparing their commitments across the range of their varied life histories. Several recent studies have explored the connection between teachers' lives on their beliefs about teaching and their practice. Teacher educators have used research to explore the potential for integrating the study of pre-service teachers lives into the curriculum of teacher preparation programs (Doyle, 1997; Gomez, 2010; Sykes & Troyna, 1991). Other scholars have examined the perspectives that experienced teachers bring from their life histories to their teaching, including the impact of their lives on their sense of professionalism (Goodson & Choi, 2008), on their literacy beliefs (Muchmore, 2001), on their work in culturally diverse classrooms (Benson, 2003), and on the challenges of navigating post-Katrina reforms in New Orleans schools (Cook, 2011). Several studies have

looked specifically at how Latina (Arzubuaga, MacGillivray, & Rueda, 2002; Cruz-Acosta, In press; Gomez, 2010; Gomez, Rodriguez, & Vonzell, 2008) and African American (Foster, 1997; Henry, 1995) teachers' life histories have shaped their practice. Nieto (2005) solicited a varied collection of stories from teachers for her book *Why We Teach*, which included teachers' reflections on their commitment to the profession that were often grounded in their autobiographies. Pabon's (2013) forthcoming dissertation titled *Schooled out: Black male teachers experiences schooling in, teaching and leaving urban schools* explored the narratives of black, male teachers as a means to understanding the challenges to recruiting and retaining these teachers. Buchanan (2009) gathered the life histories of former teachers as a means to understanding their decisions to leave the profession. Of the research cited above, a number of studies focused primarily on the lives of teachers of color, (Arzubuaga, MacGillivray, & Rueda, 2002; Cruz-Acosta, In press; Fields, 1985; Foster, 1997; Gomez, 2010; Gomez, Rodriguez, & Vonzell, 2008; Henry, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Pabon, 2013) but none explored the experiences of teachers of color working in progressive schools. While many studies of teachers' lives necessarily included discussion of issues teachers have faced in forging relationships with families, few (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003) have focused primarily on this relationship as the central question of the research. This study has explored the experiences of teachers of color working in a diverse, progressive, public school and has focused on their work with families. The perspectives these teachers brought to their work has been grounded both in their own life histories and the professional context of a progressive, public school. As such this study is uniquely positioned to inform our understandings of how teachers' life and professional experiences shape their approach to working with families.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In the current climate, teachers face an increasing number of mandates, including the directive to cultivate family engagement, even as current accountability measures continue to position teachers and families as adversaries. Recent research suggests that many teachers lack proper preparation and guidance in how to foster genuine, collaborative relationships with families (Edwards & Warin, 1999; Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005; Lareau, 1987, 2000, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Lopez, 2001; Valdes, 1996). For these teachers, developing relationships with families becomes yet another item on long checklist of requirements of the profession. For some teachers there may be a perception that family engagement is an empty goal pursued out of obligation rather than genuine interest or, put another way, “the flag we salute whenever it is hoisted” (Merrittens, 1993, as cited in Edwards & Warin, 1999, p. 325).

In the current climate of high stakes accountability measures, children, families, teachers, and schools face increasing pressures to improve student performance on standardized tests. For many teachers this results in a narrowing of their work. The push toward standardization of curriculum and pedagogy suggests that the practice of teaching might be nothing more than following a script. What is lost in this conceptualization of teaching is an appreciation of the nuanced and thoughtful practice of autonomous professionals. When test scores do not rise, teachers and schools blame families and children, while families and children blame teachers and schools. Under these antagonistic conditions, teachers miss out on the support that can be gained from working toward mutual goals with the families of their students. Working *with* families, teachers will be better equipped to support children’s learning. Further, by developing

partnerships with families, teachers may be supported in their efforts to provide their insights on the field through action and advocacy.

Recent scholarship has addressed the potential that the method of the study of teachers' lives has for pushing back against the current climate, in a time when respect for teachers' professionalism and autonomy is under attack (Bullough, 2008; Goodson & Choi, 2008). Rich portraits of teachers' lives can document the many layers of experience and understanding that teachers bring to their work. Teachers bring their whole human selves to the act of teaching. They bring their culture, their language, and their identity in the world. They are shaped by their families, their experiences with school as children, their development and training as teachers in adulthood. As a methodology, life history work captures the nuance and complexity of this relationship. This in turn will help inform the field. As Goodson (1992) explains, "Studying teachers' lives will provide a valuable range of insights into the new moves to restructure and reform schooling into new policy concerns and directives." (p. 11)

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH DESIGN

*Teacher biographies and biographical research in education can provide examples of **possible lives** – dynamic portraits of teachers working and making choices in an imperfect world, living in the landscapes of fear and doubt, holding to a faith in the craft of teaching and in the three dimensional humanity of their students that allows them to reach a kind of greatness against the grain. This kind of greatness, when nuanced and layered and textured, highlights what could be but is not yet, and helps us set our own course as teachers.*

(Ayers, 1998, p. 239)

What I thought I would do, what I actually did, and why those choices mattered

Revisiting this chapter in order to revise it after completing my research, I was overcome with a sense of nostalgia for the certainty with which I seemed to approach the process before I began. My dissertation proposal seemed like a quaint document, reflective of what I imagined the research process would look like. It became abundantly clear that my revision of this chapter required me to do much more than simply change verb tenses from future to past. The research design I had envisioned reminded me of the impressions I had while I was pregnant with my first child about what parenting would be like and what I would be like as a parent. As any parent knows, the realities of parenting are often quite different than what one anticipated in the absence of actual experience. In some fundamental ways my instincts about what research would be like and who I would be as a researcher remained consistent throughout the stages of planning and into the doing. For example, I have continued to feel throughout the process that narrative inquiry as a method suits both me as a researcher *and* the topic that I wished to explore. In some very important ways, however, the process of research (and parenting) have required me to revise and adapt to the actual circumstances that arose. In becoming a researcher (and parent) I drew on the knowledge of existing scholarship as well as the wisdom of friends and colleagues

who supported me in reflexively muddling through the choices I was making. In the end, I charted a course through the research process that felt right in my gut, both because it were grounded in my particular interests and inclinations and because it seemed to be the best approach to the material I was working with. To confirm the suspicions of my gut, however, relied on the guidance of others — scholars, mentors, colleagues, and friends — to affirm and triangulate the wisdom of my choices. In revising this chapter on my research method I was struck that the specific and deliberate choices that I did make offered important possibilities. However, I was also aware that these choices represented a loss of the insights that would have been gained using another approach. I complete this chapter comfortable in the knowledge that the process I engaged in has been “good enough” (Luttrell, 2010), while being keenly aware that I must take ownership of my process by being explicit about what, how, and why I did what I have done.

Method

This study employed the life history method, gathering and analyzing the life stories of five, urban, public, elementary school teachers as a means to investigating the question of how teachers’ life and professional experiences shape their approach to working with families. The life history method was first used at the University of Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s and 30s with roots in the fields of sociology and anthropology (Chase, 2010; Denzin, 1989). It is currently employed across many fields by researchers seeking to explore a particular question, concept, or practice through the illumination that they find the biographical method yields (Elms, 1994; Goodson, 1992; Kridel, 1998; Selzer, R. & Charon, R. 1999). As Finkelstein argued (1998) “Biography is to history what a telescope is to the stars. It reveals the invisible, extracts detail from myriad points of light, uncovers sources of illumination, and helps disaggregate and

reconstruct large heavenly pictures.” (p. 45) Despite this potential, life history work was subsequently marginalized. Since its emergence as a method in the last century, it came under fire from positivist scholars who expressed skepticism with life history research, who cited concerns that it lacked validity and reliability. For documentation of and rebuttal to this criticism see Chase (2010), Denzin (1989), and Quinn (2010). Nonetheless, the method has been recognized as critical to many fields, particularly in the area of education research (Goodson, 1992; Kridel, 1998). Mischler (2010) suggested that inquiry-guided research, a category in which I would locate narrative research, challenges positivist assumptions that research is only valid when it gets at the (capital T) Truth. Favoring instead “trustworthiness” as a goal, Mischler argued, “Focusing on trustworthiness rather than truth displaces validation from its traditional location in a presumably objective, nonreactive, and neutral reality, and moves it to the social world — a world constructed in and through our discourse and actions, through praxis.” (p. 291) Researchers who have employed the life history method recognized that for some research questions generalizability is *not* the goal – depth, complexity and nuance is (Ayers, 1998; Bullough, 1998; Finkelstein, 1998; Miller, 1998).

For the purpose of this study, which sought to explore how teachers’ life and professional experiences shaped their approach to working with families, the life history method was the most apt choice for two important reasons. First, in an era when contemporary education reforms have mandated the standardization of teaching practice, the study of teachers’ lives illustrates the complexity, the humanity, and the particularity of the relationships between teachers and families (Bullough, 2008; Middleton, 1992). Second, because the field of teaching is historically gendered (Blount, 1998; Markowitz, 1993; Rousmaniere, 1997) and because women’s voices have routinely been ignored and silenced, the life history method in education research serves

deliberately to put teachers' subjectivities at front and center (Casey, 1993; Chase, 1995; Pinar & Pautz, 1998; Wagner-Martin, 1998).

The life history method challenges the drive toward standardization of teaching on several levels (Bullough, 2008; Goodson, 1992; Miller, 1998). Directives of current educational reforms imply that teaching can be scripted and posit that such standardization will result in better academic outcomes for students. This approach renders teachers' knowledge, knowledge that is grounded in their life and professional experiences, irrelevant and invisible. Justification for such reforms draw on research conducted by "Researchers [who], even when they had stopped treating the teacher as a numerical aggregate, historical footnote or unproblematic role incumbent still treated teachers as interchangeable types unchanged by circumstance or time" (Goodson, 1992, p. 4). Under the rhetoric of the accountability movement, curriculum and pedagogy have been reduced to "best practice" prescriptive approaches. These prescriptions are justified by scientifically based research which purport to offer the formula for the best academic "outcomes" for students, though these outcomes are often limited to the raising of scores on standardized tests. These mandates fail to capitalize on the particular strengths and knowledge that teachers bring to their work. Miller (1998) suggested that the life history method itself pushes back against the current culture of reform, which erases the subjectivity of the teacher. She wrote,

At a time when so much teacher education and educational research focuses on standards and on teaching as a set of delivery systems, biography as an educational practice generates material and processes that we as educators can use to dislodge unitary notions both of our lives and our voices and of prescriptive systems of teaching and learning. (p. 234)

In exploring the particular question of teachers' relationships with families, this method seemed the most apt choice for its ability to represent human relationships in all their complexity and contradictions.

Life history work is also employed for its capacity to give voice to the experiences of women teachers. Denzin (1989), describing the specific potential that biographical work lends to this goal, emphasized that, "...biographical work must always be interventionist, seeking to give notice to those who may otherwise not be allowed to tell their story or who are denied a voice to speak." (p. 82) Given the possibility this method affords, a number of scholars have used the biographical method in order to bring the subjectivity of women teachers to the forefront (Casey, 1993; Chase, 1995; Foster, 1997; Middleton, 1992; Weiler, 1998). Such scholarship placed the lives of women teachers in their social and cultural context and often employed feminist theory to analyze ways that women teachers have been marginalized. Pinar & Pautz (1998), encouraging the use of the life history method in education research, elaborated that the process of documenting teachers' lives confronts "...the silence of women's experience and voices, the separation of women's lived worlds from the public discourse of education." (p. 62) This study has used the life history method in part to reclaim the experiences of women teachers, about whom much is said but often not enough is known, and to interpret these lives as located in their social and historical contexts.

Setting and Participants

In order to find teachers to participate in this study, I specifically chose to solicit a sample of teachers who all worked at the same, particular school. I made this selection for a number of reasons. As Luttrell (2010) clarified, the choices a researcher makes when soliciting or selecting a sample must be understood as an initial stage in the framing of the study itself. Reflecting on

her own process of selecting women to interview for her research on women in an adult education program, she elaborated,

I decided to interview women who were mothers with children still living at home. I want to emphasize that I did not realize, even when making this sampling decision, that I was taking a theoretical step in my conception of the research as a study of the relationship between mothering and schooling. (p. 260)

I must be explicit then, about my own decision to interview *these* particular teachers at *this* particular school, and recognize that this choice represented a theoretical step in the process. In looking for a site that would give offer me insights into my research question, I was drawn to the Cedar School*. I knew that the school had been founded nearly two decades ago by a group of families working together with teachers who sought to ground their work in strong relationships between school and home, and was interested to see how this professional context would be manifested in the teachers' experiences. I was additionally interested learning from the stories of Cedar's teachers because the school's educational philosophy conveyed a commitment to a progressive approach to teaching and learning. I wondered if working at a school with a child-centered approach to curriculum and pedagogy would result in the teachers taking a family-centered approach to their work as well. Finally, though there are a handful of alternative, progressive, public schools in New York City, I especially interested in Cedar because I had observed that most of the teachers there have been African American and Latina women. This stood in contrast to what I have observed, anecdotally, at other alternative, progressive, public schools, where the majority of the teachers seemed to be white. As the documentation of progressive schools has mostly described the experiences of white educators (Antler, 1987;

* pseudonym

Diamond, 2008; Hauser, 2006; Meier, 1995; Patri, 1917; Sadovnik & Semel, 2002; Semel 1992; Semel & Sadovnik, 1999; Semel & Sadovnik, 2008; Wallace, 2006; Weber, 1997) I wanted to document the lives and working experiences of progressive teachers who were women of color.

What follows is a brief description of the physical setting of the school. The Cedar School is located in a New York City neighborhood with many Spanish-speaking immigrants, particularly from the Dominican Republic. The surrounding neighborhood contains many two to three story buildings with commercial storefronts and residential units upstairs, with some larger six-story apartment buildings. The storefronts contain a mix of small businesses: Dominican restaurants, nail shops, a pizza place, a tiny café, an office advertising legal and accounting services, a gourmet food shop that sells handmade pasta. Many of the stores have signage in both Spanish and English. Across the street from the school is a vacant lot, half of which is used for parking cars. There is a branch of the New York Public Library two blocks south that sees active use, even in the middle of the day. Four blocks south of the school is a large public park with a playground where classes go in warmer weather to play, for the school's annual Field Day, and to regularly train for a 5K Fun Run that they participate in together at the end of each school year.

Cedar is housed in a newly constructed, brick building that was opened in the mid 1990s. It is four stories high and houses two schools; Cedar, which occupies the entire third floor as well as half of a hall on the first floor of the building; and the Shipley School, a two way bilingual, public, elementary school which offers instruction in Spanish and English. On the ground floor is an auditorium and cafeteria, which are shared on a schedule by the two schools. Also on the first floor is an exit to the schoolyard that includes a climbing structure and a long curved, bench-width planter containing shade trees. Visitors to Cedar sign in with the security guard on the

ground floor and then proceed to the third floor either by elevator or stairs, which open out in the middle of a long hallway. Immediately facing the elevators are three wooden bleacher-type seats, often occupied by older students working individually or in groups, school staff conferencing with each other or the occasional bake sale. To the left of the elevator are the school’s administrative offices and enrichment rooms (e.g. the art room, the resource room). To the right are three bays of classrooms, which contain classes organized by grade groupings. In each of these bays the space of the classrooms spills out into the hallway. It is not unusual to see students sitting on the floor or in small chairs in front of their rooms, working at a sand table, observing the class guinea pig, or conferencing with a teacher. Hallways are also used to extend the storage capacity of rooms with shelves for drying student work, and include bulletin boards filled with photographs from class trips, students’ poetry and the classroom schedule.

Cedar, and many other small schools with similar admissions processes, refers to itself as a “school of choice,” in distinction from most public schools that admit students by geographic zone. Admission to Cedar is done by a lottery, by which the school enrolls a student body that reflects a mix comparable to the surrounding area by race and ethnicity. The following demographic data is available through the NYC Department of Education website and was submitted as part of the school’s Comprehensive Educational Plan (CEP.)

Table 2.1: Cedar School Demographics

Cedar School Student Demographics 2011/12 School Year	
Total number of students	260
Race/Ethnicity	
American Indian or Alaska Native	<1%
Black or African American	9%
Hispanic or Latino	63%
Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	4%
White	23%

Percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch	62%
Percentage of ELLs receiving ESL services	12.4%
Percentage of students receiving special education services	17.4%

The Cedar staff includes classroom teachers, administrators, therapists, aides, paraprofessionals, and additional teachers who provide enrichment (e.g. art, drama, ESL.) There are currently fourteen full-time classroom teachers who have been with the school for a range of years. A handful remain from the founding of the school in 1993, while a number have joined the teaching staff in the last couple of years. Historically, at least half of the teachers have been Latina, often also being bilingual in Spanish and English, with the remaining teachers appearing to be African-American, Asian and White. However, in the last two years, a number of veteran, Latina teachers have retired from teaching or otherwise left the school. As of this year approximately half of Cedar’s teachers appear to be white. Though in the past the school often had one or two male teachers, all of the classroom teachers for the 2012/13 school year are women. The school offers six grades, K through 5th. When the school was established these grades were organized into three grade groupings K/1st, 2nd/3rd, 4th/5th, with each teacher having a mixed grade group of students from both grades. Over the course of the school’s history, however, this model has been abandoned and replaced with a looping model, wherein each teacher works with the same group of children for two years in a row, e.g. teaching kindergarten one year and following the children into first grade the following year. Each year, depending on the needs of the students, the school may offer a self-contained special education classroom or an integrated co-teaching (ICT) classroom that includes both special education and general

education students. In the last year, however, the practice of placing students in self contained special education classes is being reformed system-wide throughout the DOE. By the new policy, most students with special education needs are placed in classrooms throughout the school and provided with push-in or pull-out services as needed.

Before beginning my research I obtained IRB approval for my research from both the CUNY Graduate Center and the New York City Department of Education. To begin the process of selecting the sample for this study I distributed a brief questionnaire, which included a S.A.S.E. for return, to all of Cedar's teachers' through their school mailboxes (See Appendix A). The questionnaire asked them to report the number of years they had been teaching, number of years at the school, what grades they taught, what languages they spoke, their race/ethnicity, gender, and whether or not they themselves were parents. This questionnaire offered a brief description of the study, explaining what would be required of participants in the way of interviews and observations. The teachers were asked to indicate whether or not they would be willing to participate in the study. I had hoped that this process would yield a number of willing participants and that I would need to narrow down the sample.

As is not atypical with such cold-call efforts at soliciting research participants, very few of the surveys were returned. One teacher reported never having received the form in her mailbox. This low response rate required me to re-evaluate my strategy for gathering participants. I already knew two Cedar teachers, Daniela and Estelle, having met them through the institutes and conferences of the Prospect Center. After receiving little response to the questionnaire, I asked those two teachers directly if they themselves would be willing to participate in my research. I also asked if they could assist me in identifying additional prospective participants. I explained that I hoped to find a small sample of teachers who had

varying years of teaching experience. While each teacher’s experiences are unique, I felt that studying teachers at different stages in their careers would contribute to an understanding of how the relationship between schools and families evolves as circumstances of the teacher’s work and life change and grow. Daniela and Estelle each gave me email addresses for teachers who might be open being interviewed. I followed up with emails to these prospective participants. Several indicated that they did not have the time, but three additional teachers agreed to participate. Over the course of the year that I spent gathering data through individual and group interviews, all five of the teachers remained in the study and were willing to participate in each of the iterations of the data collection process. After receiving a small grant from the Graduate Center, I was able to offer each of the teachers a gift certificate worth \$100 for the vendor of their choice, such as Barnes and Noble or Amazon, as a small gesture recognizing the value of their time.

Given the demographics of the teaching staff at the time that I began the process of soliciting participants, I anticipated that approximately half of the teachers would be Latina and possibly bilingual in Spanish and English. I also hoped that at least half of the teachers would themselves be parents. When planning this study, I had hoped to start with a sample of eight teachers, anticipating the possibility that I might lose some participants over the course of the study. In the end five teachers agreed to participate in my study and each remained in the sample throughout the process of repeated interviews. The following chart describes the teachers briefly by demographics. The fuller story of their lives can be found in Chapter 4.

Table 2.2: PARTICIPATING TEACHERS

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Race/ethnicity	Has children?	Teaching career
Anita	Late 30s	Latina	Mother of school aged children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19 years in the classroom • Founding teacher at Cedar
Daniela	Late 50s	Latina, Puerto	Mother of grown children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23 years in the classroom • Founding teacher at Cedar

		Rican		• Retired 2011
Estelle	Mid 40s	African American	No children	• 20 years in the classroom • 15 years at Cedar
Ginger	Early 20s	White	No children	• 2 years teaching, both at Cedar • NYC Teaching Fellow
Irene	Early 60s	African American	Mother and grandmother	• 15 years in the classroom • 11 years at Cedar

Data Collection

The primary source of data for this study was individual interviews with each of the five focus teachers. All of the interviews scheduled outside of the teachers' busy work days, afterschool or in the evenings to allow for adequate time and unrushed conditions for reflection. My second interview with Daniela was conducted during the summer of 2011, when we were both attending summer institute for teachers. Each of the teachers consented to having the interviews recorded using two digital audio recorders and documented with handwritten notes. I conducted two, in depth interviews with each teacher. Additionally, in order to develop my understanding of the school's history and its role in the teachers' professional lives, I conducted follow-up phone interviews with Irene and Estelle. I did not feel the need for these additional phone interviews with Anita, Daniela and Ginger as relevant aspects of the school's history had already been addressed in the in-person interviews. Additionally, I did occasionally follow up an interview with emails to the teachers to clarify my understanding of points raised in our conversations.

The first individual interview focused on the teachers' non-teaching related life history including childhood and family background, educational history, and, when applicable, the teacher's experiences as a parent. For this interview I chose excerpts from Dan McAdams Life Story Interview Protocol (See Appendix B), which asks participants to first create a brief outline of the chapters of their life and to then describe certain critical moments in their lives (e.g. a high

point, a low point, a turning point, etc). I selected this structure for the first interview because I anticipated that it would allow me to get a sense briefly of the chronology of their lives, but that the bulk of the interview would allow the teachers to identify the important moments in their lives. I felt that this shift in weight from the more traditional chronological telling to one emphasizing critical events would allow me to get a sense of the teachers' process for making sense of their lives. The second interview (see Appendix C) addressed the teachers' experiences in education, both as students and teachers, and their work with families. My initial draft of the second interview protocol, which involved over twenty-one specific and directed questions (each with their own sub-questions), was wisely abandoned on the advice of my committee. The revised protocol, which framed our discussion much more loosely around the two categories of school experiences and work with families, created the space for the teachers' more lengthy narratives to be elicited. All of my individual interviews were guided by these basic protocols, in the hopes that approximately the same topics would be covered with all five teachers. However, as necessary, I dropped questions from my script or asked follow up questions during the interviews to address unanticipated subjects that arose.

In addition to collecting data through interviews, I made visits to the school and the teachers' classrooms to get a feel for the environment of their work and the tone of their interactions with families. The only teacher who I was not able to observe in a classroom was Ginger, who by the time she had joined my sample was no longer a full time classroom teacher, instead working one on one with students from her office as the coordinator of special education services for the school. My observational visits took place on regular school days, either during morning drop-off or afternoon pick-up to view the teacher during informal interactions with parents and caregivers. Additionally I was able to observe special events that families were

specifically invited to attend including Curriculum Night at the beginning of the school year and Family Brunch at the end of the school year. My fieldnotes from each of these visits to the school was added to the data analyzed for the study.

In addition to interviews and observations, I collected artifacts, especially those that I believed would shed light on the relationship between the school and families. Artifacts reviewed for this study included: the school's mission and vision statements generated by families and teachers during the planning stages of the school; proposals and reports and submitted to the Board of Education and later Department of Education regarding the schools ongoing growth; examples of letters sent home to families by the teachers; and minutes from the School Leadership Team's monthly meetings. Additionally, during the course of our interviews, several of the teachers suggested that I review news coverage of the school, particularly as it related to events in the school's recent history. For more on my use of these documents see the introduction to Chapter 3, where I describe my method for developing an oral history of the school.

Once I had completed the individual interviews I scheduled one group discussion that included all the participants. Adding this element to my research design served two purposes. First it gave me an opportunity to see how the teachers talked to each other about their teaching and their work with families. Second, I hoped that by facilitating this discussion I could offer the teachers a meaningful, professional development experience on the topic of our work with families. All five teachers agreed to participate, and we met one winter afternoon sitting in a circle in Irene's classroom. Indeed, though we had gone on talking past dark on a Friday afternoon, at the end of our discussion the teachers all thanked me for giving them the opportunity to work together in this way. To structure this conversation, which I was the chair or

facilitator but was also an active participant, followed the structure developed by Patricia Carini for sharing of recollections. In the sharing of recollections, each participant has an opportunity to share a story from their own life. Given a range of possibilities for structuring a group discussion, I chose to have the teachers share stories from their practice with each other. My decision was grounded in Carini's (2001) contention that this process would provide us with the opportunity to experience the particularity each individual story placed in the context of a collective process of reflection. As Carini explained,

I equally rely on story to illuminate the thickness, selectivity and complexity with which each person (and all persons) craft the stuff of a life into a personal poetic identifiably each person's own. Weighing story in two directions, I give it prominence of place for its pluralizing and publicizing function and equally for its twinned function of connecting both teller and hearer with personal memory and an innerness I see threatened on all sides by memory's (and history's) eclipse. (p. 2)

When following Carini's process for sharing recollections, participants receive a set of guidelines with instructions for how to prepare and to share their stories. These guidelines are usually provided to participants in advance of the discussion. (For the guidelines I distributed to Cedar's teachers, see Appendix D)

Before the recollections are shared, however, participants begin with a reflection on a word. The process of reflecting on a word asks all participants to take a moment to jot down definitions, understandings and associations with a chosen key word. Each participant then reads these notes aloud and the gathered notes are summarized or restated by a note-taking chair. Such a collective process of reflection on a word serves to set a tone for the work that proceeds from this process. As Patricia Carini elaborated,

Reflecting on a word is quiet, solitary work, each person delving into her memory for phrases, words, and images evoked by the word, writing these down as they come to mind. The point of a reflection is not to winnow or define a word. The point is to uncover some of the richness of layered meaning the word embodies. (as cited in Streib, 2011, p. 42)

To set the tone for my work with Cedar's teachers, I asked the teachers to reflect on the word "community", which I selected after reviewing the transcripts of the individual interviews. Each of the teachers, when describing their work with families at Cedar referred to a strong sense of community within their classrooms and at the school as a whole, which they felt supported them in developing strong relationships with their students' families. As this concept recurred throughout these interviews, I thought it would be good to articulate our varied understandings of the concept of community as a foundation on which to ground the sharing of our stories. As our subsequent discussion unfurled, several of the teachers referred back explicitly to the layered understandings of community that this process had allowed us to unpack.

Following the reflection we began sharing recollections from our teaching histories. My guidelines for the recollection asked them to recall their experiences working with families that could be mostly positive, mostly negative, or mixed. In advance of our meeting I provided the teachers with written instructions (Appendix D) to help prompt them in developing their stories to include descriptive details. As we began the process of sharing our stories, one of the teachers volunteered to serve as a time-keeper, to insure that each speaker would have adequate time to share. Each storyteller was given the opportunity to speak uninterrupted and without questions or comments between the stories. Turns were taken spontaneously in not particular order, as speakers were often prompted to speak when they felt a connection with the previous story.

When each participant, including myself, had shared a story of their work with families, I provided a brief summary, pulling out threads and themes that had run across the stories, noting patterns and similarities as well as dissonances. Following this process a more informal conversation flowed around the table. As we had been primed in the process of turn taking, the subsequent conversation proceeded mostly in a circle with each person speaking in turn with minimal back and forth discussion. This entire discussion was transcribed, and the transcript and my notes from the conversation were added to the other data collected for this study. Additionally, as with all other interviews I wrote fieldnotes to document my observations of the discussion immediately afterward and analytic memos in the weeks that followed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis took place in multiple stages and employed several strategies. Immediately following each interview I jotted fieldnotes to note any questions, connections, tensions, or surprises that arose during the interview. Though these fieldnotes were mostly intended to describe the circumstances of the interview, they often represented my initial attempts at identifying issues or questions for subsequent exploration. In the days and weeks that followed, I drafted analytic memos to articulate wonderings, patterns, and concerns that arose for me as I immersed myself in the work. As Maxwell (2005) recommended, the researcher ought to make a regular habit to, “Write memos as a way of working on a problem you encounter in making sense of your topic, setting, study or data.” (p. 13) While memos are not a part of the formal stage of the data analysis process, they represent an initial attempt at making sense of the research and thus should be considered a part of the process of analysis. Insights, contradictions, and questions identified in these memos may chart some path toward the more formal stage of

analysis. For me these memos proved invaluable as a first place to wrestle with ideas that I would return to later in the formal writing process. They also offered me a tool for stepping back from the immersive and, at times, exhausting process of interviewing to see the stories alongside each other and to begin to think the broader context in which they were situated.

Throughout the data collection and analysis process I was mindful that I needed to be aware of the role my relationships with the teachers might play in the research process. Some of the teachers, Daniela and Estelle, I knew rather well before beginning this project. I had met Anita and Irene once or twice before beginning our interviews. Ginger I met as a result of doing this research. As I was interviewing them about their personal histories I got to know all of them a great deal more as a result of our conversations. My relationships with the teachers required me to heed Josselson's (2004) recommendation that a researcher identify for themselves whether they will interpret narratives through a "hermeneutics of faith" or a "hermeneutics of suspicion." At either end of the spectrum, faith and suspicion inform the degree to which the researcher takes the participants' words at face value. In some cases the researcher may wish to read the participants' discourse as "true" and not use the analysis of data to interrogate the veracity of the participants' reported experience. At the other end of the spectrum, the researcher may view the participants' discourse as deliberately or unconsciously constructed to represent a particular version of events. For the purpose of this study, my analytical lens borrowed from both ends of the spectrum. The teachers' narratives were taken as representing *their* truths. I did not imagine that they were deliberately attempting to deceive me or misrepresent their understanding of their own lives. On the other hand, I engaged with a hermeneutics of suspicion to explore what additional factors might be shaping the teachers' understandings of the events of their lives, even if they themselves may not have been conscious of larger forces at play. Thus the analysis phase

of the study balanced faith *and* suspicion – seeking to respect the teachers’ understandings of their lives while using theory to understand their experiences in a larger context.

Throughout the analysis, however, I never presumed that my or the teachers own analysis of their lives should be taken as the objective “truth.” As Denzin (1989) emphasized, the elicitation of a biography is a co-creation by both researcher and subject. The analysis of biographical material is act of interpretation undertaken by the researcher, read through the lens of their own subjectivity. Describing the strengths and challenges of narrative research, Reissman underscored, “Narratives do not mirror the past, they refract it.” (p. 708) Throughout the process of data collection and analysis I was keenly aware of the role that I and my relationship with the participating teachers played in shaping a very particular narrative account of their lives. Through the choices I made in the retelling and sense making of the experiences of these participating teachers, I continually refracted their lives through my lens. While this is clearly a limitation of my research I do not believe it discredits the stories this study has to tell.

I was surprised to find that the process of transcription, far from being simply a mechanical task, became itself a step in the process of data analysis. Though I found transcribing to be quite labor intensive, even if I had had adequate funds to do so I would not have opted to outsource this part of the process. Hearing and re-hearing the interview recordings allowed me to become deeply immersed in the data, so much so that I began hearing the teachers’ voices in my sleep. As I transcribed the recordings I took periodic breaks to write memos about my observations and thoughts connected to the individual interviews, and to create charts comparing patterns and noting differences across all the interviews. Categories that emerged from this work would eventually form the list of codes I would apply in my analysis of the complete set of data.

Another important piece of my work with the transcripts was sharing them with others. While I was completing my transcriptions I was also auditing a class with Wendy Luttrell called Doing Narrative Analysis. In this class we were introduced to strategies for playing with the language of the narratives, to see what this parsing of the transcripts might yield. I began by taking excerpts from the group interview where each of the teachers responded to my question, “What do teachers need to do the work of developing relationships with families?” Then I adapted the process described by Gilligan et al. (2006) of stripping away the text of transcripts to create “poems” that included only phrases which began with the words “I”, “you” or “we”. I lined the poems up side by side to compare them and wrote memos about the patterns and contradictions that emerged from these stripped down versions of the narratives. This process helped me see the choices each speaker was making in crafting their story and revealed how they positioned themselves in response to my question. For example, Irene’s *I poem* was mostly composed of verbs suggesting introspection, such as thinking and understanding, whereas Daniela’s *I poem* contained verbs that implied action, including telling, saying, going, and trying. For each of the teachers, distinct characteristics of their voices emerged, from tentative to assertive, imaginative or contemplative. This process gave me a starting point for knowing the teachers as I began the very difficult task of constructing their biographies.

Additionally, I shared the transcripts through my work with large and small groups to understand what others might see in the data I had already pored over. Throughout 2011 to 2012 I participated in a writing group with colleagues from my doctoral program, some of whom were also working with interview data in their research. Looking at my own work alongside their research helped me see the possibilities in my data. I brought excerpts of my transcripts to the Narrative Analysis class for review by the whole group. Additionally, I met regularly with three

colleagues from the class who were also immersed in their dissertations and we participated in close readings of each others' transcripts. Finally, in the summer of 2012, I brought an excerpt from the group Interview transcript to the summer institute of the Center for Descriptive Inquiry (formerly The Prospect Center Summer Institute on Descriptive Inquiry) to share in a working session. There I received feedback from colleagues with particular knowledge of the descriptive processes I had used to frame the group interview. Throughout all these opportunities to share the data, I kept notes of discussions and followed up these sessions by writing memos about how others' perspectives on my data were contributing to my own understandings.

Alongside these opportunities to share my data with others, I began the process of coding the transcripts to facilitate my thematic analysis of the teachers' narratives. To do this work I loaded all of my Interview transcripts and fieldnotes into the HyperRESEARCH software program. This program allowed me to identify codes and tag passages from the transcripts. The program then allowed me to generate reports that culled references using single or cross-referenced coded themes. Through identifying categories or themes or codes a researcher seeks to make sense of data by drawing out and identifying patterns and sites of contradiction, which may help in theorizing explanations for such patterns and contradictions. Maxwell (2005) makes the distinction between organizational categories, or categories the researcher may have had in mind going into the research process, and substantive and theoretical categories, which emerge through the process of analysis. As I entered this research I anticipated that I would use organizational categories linked to the scholarship from my literature review on the topic of family engagement and the study of life histories. These included codes such as "experiences of language" and "teachers' families' feelings about school".

Substantive categories include descriptive themes using language that either the research participants cite or the researcher constructs to highlight salient concepts and issues that emerge from the data. Once I began to review my transcripts, some of the substantive coding categories that emerged included phrases that the teachers introduced, such as “power parents”, which several of them used when recounting the history of the school. I also noted that many of the teachers’ stories of their work with families focused on work with children in special education or with other potential diagnoses, so another substantive code was “labeling”. While it was useful for me to hold the organizational categories in my mind as I began the process, I found that the substantive categories were more fruitful in yielding themes that I would later focus on as I wrote up my analysis of the data. Additionally, though this was not my intention, I found that the process of poring over the transcripts multiple times to apply codes added another layer of intimacy for me with the texts. This fluency and familiarity with the teachers’ narratives served me well in the process of my analysis and writing.

Maxwell’s framework for developing substantive categories mirrored Denzin’s (1989) recommendation that data analysis be grounded in the biographical method. “Narrative segments and categories within the interview-story are isolated. Patterns of meaning and experience are sought.” (p. 56) In narrative and life history work in particular, this kind of thematic analysis can be a particularly useful strategy when comparing the lives of multiple participants (Reissman, 2004). However, Reissman reminded the researcher to be aware of the limitations of this analytic method, as it may attend more to *what* is said and perhaps not enough to *how* it is said. She cautioned that thematic analysis may presume a commonality of language and expression between participants and researcher, as the focus is on the content of what is being reported and not the ways it is being constructed and delivered. Reissman questioned, “What happens to

ambiguities, “deviant” responses that don’t fit into a typology, the unspoken?” (p. 706). In my work comparing how the teachers each talked about their work at Cedar I found this to be true, especially when the teachers seemed to have different views on the value of progressive pedagogy and how these values were manifested over the history of the school. This challenge was especially present as I attempted to weave together the teachers’ recollections into an oral history of the school. In the case where teachers seemed to disagree on events and issues related to the history of the school, I explicitly identified these perspectives as their own. In cases where there seemed to be general agreement about details, I represented this as a shared understanding. I also found these ambiguities to be at play when the teachers talked about what they needed to be in place to feel supported in their work with families. While they often appeared to share a common language, for example about the need for teachers to have more time to do their work, the underlying stance of these assertions was often vastly different between and among the teachers. These tensions and the implications of these differences in perspective are explored in Chapter 6.

As I continued the process of analysis, I found I needed to return to theory to help me make sense of some of the patterns and tensions I was observing. Maxwell (2005) describes the identification of theoretical categories, which “place the coded data into a more general or abstract framework” (p. 97). Such theoretical categories may engage larger social theories to illuminate issues that emerge from the data, on, for example, differing views of what counts as teacher knowledge. After re-reading the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Himley & Carini (2000), I created a code for a theoretical category that I termed the “descriptive stance” to mark places where I noticed the teachers using a descriptive and non-judgemental language when talking about families. After identifying what I found to be two conflicting grand narratives on

concepts of teacher knowledge that are often leveraged by contemporary educational reforms, I created a code for “teacher knowledge.” My efforts to analyze the teachers’ stories within the larger framework addressed Goodson’s (1992) concern that the life history is incomplete if it is not understood within and illustrative of the historical context. He wrote, “The crucial focus for life history work is to locate the teacher’s own life story alongside a broader contextual analysis, to tell in Stenhouse’s words, ‘a story of actions within a theory of context.’” (p. 6) Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2008) concurred, arguing that,

Our point... is not to claim simply that history matters, but rather to argue that *analyzing personal narrative evidence demands attention to historical contextualization.*

Conversely, personal narrative analysis *can illuminate the operation of historical forces and of public or historical narratives as they influence people’s motivations and their self understandings as historical agents.* (pp. 44-45)

Developing theoretical categories achieved the goal of allowing the teachers’ lives to illuminate the broader social context, situating their biographies in the context of the historical eras and movements that they had lived through and situating their work within the space of the recent history of public education.

When I came to the more formal stage of writing up my analysis I knew that the choices I would make in representation would be just that, a series of decisions that would foreground some aspects of these complex narratives while invariably neglecting others. As I wrestled with the choices before me I took comfort in Luttrell’s (2010) candid and thoughtful description of her own research process. She explained,

As I wrote about the interview material, I felt torn between reporting individual life stories (which could not so easily be reduced to a main point) and building a case for the

patterns I was detecting. It was at this point that I made a decision to focus on patterns and not individuals and something was lost and something else gained. I lost the capacity to see each woman primarily as an individual with her own story to tell, but gained clarity on what I came to understand as links between the social and the psychological in the women's narratives. (p. 265)

In my own process, I made the decision to skew my attention toward the individual lives and stories, which I felt provided a necessary foundation for my work on the themes that reached across the narratives. In Chapter 4 I have attempted to construct narratives for each teacher's life, focusing on their individual stories. As I will describe in more detail in the introduction to that chapter, I made a deliberate choice to construct each of these biographies somewhat differently, led in my constructions by the differences that emerged in each teachers' telling. I then used the foundation of Chapter 4 to ground the more comparative work of Chapter 5, where I present my analysis of the teachers' work with families. In this chapter each of the teachers stories of their work with families were presented individually, but I identified two broad themes that I observed running across the narratives. These themes were, first, the theme of the teachers' approaches to working across spaces of difference, and, second, the theme of the additional challenge to the relationship between teachers and families posed by the experience of working to support children with diagnoses and labels.

Though in this work I was able to both present the teachers' individual lives and offer a thematic analysis of the collection, I eventually realized that I needed to abandon my desire to present a deep structural analysis of the discourse of the teachers' narratives. These analytic strategies have been documented and described by Hill (2005), Quinn (2010), and Reissman (2008). Analyzing the teachers' stories with this interpretive approach would likely have yielded

important insights into the culture embedded in their narratives. Describing the potential of such work, Hill (2005), in her essay on Finding Culture in Narrative, emphasized,

...That narratives are not merely overtly “about” some “content,” such as what happened when, where, and to whom, but that they somehow make public the covert underlying presuppositions that organize the worlds in which speakers live. The cultural knowledge that resided in these presuppositions is often so “transparent” to speakers that it is inutterable. (p. 157)

Close reading and structural analysis of narratives as constructed texts can bring to light this unstated and presumed cultural knowledge, knowledge that is surely embedded in the Cedar teachers’ stories. While I have referred very cursorily to the choices I saw the teachers making as they constructed their narratives, I have not nearly done justice to the possibility of this approach in this study. I am able to make peace, for now, with this missed opportunity by making a commitment to return to these narratives again in the future with this analytic strategy at hand.

Before I describe the limitations of my study, I wish to make one final note about the process by which I constructed this paper. Wherever possible in my writing I have attempted to foreground the voices of the teachers in their own words. Throughout the following chapters, there are long stretches of excerpts taken directly from my Interview transcripts. This has been a conscious effort to allow the teachers to narrate their life experiences in their own words. It has been part of my attempt to mitigate the effect of my limitations as a researcher. Chase (2010) underscored the implications of this choice, explaining, “It bears emphasizing that when these researchers present extensive quotations from narrators’ stories, they make room for readers’ alternative interpretations.” (p. 223). I do not discount the important role that I have had to play in setting a context for understanding the teachers’ lives and work, and my engagement of theory

as a tool for analyzing and making sense of these narratives. At the same time I wanted to be sure that the teachers' voices ran strong and clear throughout this text. I have been humbled by the opportunity to work with these five women, and am moved by what they and their stories have taught me about the complex, fascinating, and varied relationships between families and teachers.

Taking a descriptive stance toward research

Before identifying the specific limitations of this research, it is important that I contextualize my stance as a researcher, a stance that has been shaped by my own participation in the work of descriptive inquiry. When I first began teaching I was encouraged by my colleagues at Long Island University to attend the Prospect Center's fall conferences and summer institutes. As I struggled to make sense of who I was as a new teacher, this work felt both intuitive and absolutely necessary. It was at Prospect that I first met a number of Cedar's teachers and became particularly curious about them as a community of teachers and their orientation toward their work. Beyond Prospect, my growth as a teacher was sustained locally throughout the year by participating in the New York City based Adolescent Study Group (later renamed the Descriptive Inquiry Study Group) and the faculty inquiry group at LIU Brooklyn's School of Education, both of which used the processes of descriptive inquiry. My participation in this work led me to be considered to teach undergraduate and graduate courses on the Descriptive Review of Children and Adolescents at LIU Brooklyn. In my work in all these settings I was able to practice the descriptive processes and to be mentored by an array of thoughtful educators whose work was philosophically grounded in these practices. Though this work felt like a natural and intuitive match for my disposition and instincts as an educator, I have

no doubt that these experiences and connections with other like-minded educators profoundly shaped my stance toward children and families, toward teaching and learning. Shaped by this stance as a new researcher, I chose to engage in educational research with a strength-based orientation toward wanting to understand what makes teachers feel successful in their work with families. This orientation toward my research was a deliberate choice not to focus on exposing the many ways in which teachers can be unsuccessful in their work with families. At the same time, my descriptive stance oriented me toward the particular. This research was not intended to result in yet another list of directives for teachers to follow. Instead I have sought to understand the specific ways that each of these teachers drew on the perspectives gained by their life and professional experiences as they approached their work with families. In reproducing and analyzing the teachers' narratives, I have tried to foreground the particularity of their perspectives. Revisiting the teachers' narratives, I do not think I have taken a leap in assuming that they have each strove to do their best in their work with families. Additionally, as a researcher taking a descriptive stance, I used the descriptive processes as a structure for eliciting the teachers' narratives. Finally, throughout the process of analysis, I shared the texts of the interview transcripts with colleagues using structures grounded in the descriptive processes. I recognize that the findings I offer in the last chapter of this dissertation, particularly my recommendations for the field of teacher education, are grounded in a set of beliefs that have been shaped by my participation in the process of descriptive inquiry.

Limitations

As described at the beginning of this chapter, the findings of this study are somewhat deliberately not generalizable. The nature of human relationships, in this case between parents

and teachers, is that they cannot be reproduced, standardized or scripted. This is not to say that the findings are not illuminating or useful, simply that it will not result in a formula for “best-practice” application. Life history work is, by its very nature, a specific and particular work. For this reason I have not gathered participants by random sampling. The research site has been chosen deliberately: a school where the teachers have been explicit in their desire to build strong relationships with families. As described in the research design section above, I sought a sample of teachers that would reflect the demographics of the Cedar’s teachers, but this sample does not reflect a cross section of all, urban, public school teachers. For these reasons, this study will have limitations in terms of the generalizability of findings.

The focus of this work has been on documenting the life and professional experiences of the teachers and attempting to make sense of the ways in which their lives have shaped their practice in their work with their students’ families. Data collected in the form of individual interviews and group recollections and discussion was completely one-sided. It conveyed the teachers’ understandings of these relationships and did not attempt to capture or understand how the teachers’ work was experienced by families. Addressing the strengths and limitations of various forms of qualitative data collection, Suzuki et al., in their 2007 piece titled “The Pond You Fish In Determines the Fish You Catch,” emphasize the ways in which data collection methods limit or slant the types of data that are generated. In life history and other qualitative work, interviews produce data that is extremely useful in capturing a subject’s perception of the story of their life but must also be understood as being constrained by several factors (Kvale, 1996). First, my interview questions reflected my subjectivity focused on the issues I choose to highlight and pursue. Second, responses to interview questions represented the way that the teachers have subjectively made sense and chosen to depict their life experiences (Suzuki et al.,

2007). For these reasons interview data can and should be triangulated through the use of other data collection strategies. My observations at the school and review of archival materials helped in addressing the research question from another angle but, again, only represented a partial view. Observations of the teachers' classrooms and their interactions with families provided but a brief glimpse into the experience for the families. However, as the focus of this study is not on the lives of the families and their impressions of the relationship have not been explored. This too can be seen as a limitation of this study.

Another factor which limits the study is my identity as a researcher. As Denzin (1989) cautioned, the act of creating biographical texts is one that is necessarily subjective and interpretive. Wherever possible I have tried to make my identity visible in my work but as the focus of this work has been on the lives of the teachers I am sure that there are aspects of myself that I have shrouded from the reader. Nonetheless, this text is inscribed by and with my presence. As Denzin explained, "When a writer writes a biography, he or she writes him- or herself into the life of the subject written about." (p. 26). I felt this caution most keenly when attempting to construct the teachers' biographies. I have tried to be transparent about the selves I brought to this work as a white, monolingual, middle class woman, a teacher, and mother of two small children. While I have taught school aged children in out-of-school settings (afterschool programs and museums) I have never been a public school, classroom teacher. Four of the five the teachers in this study are women of color, three from working class families, two from bilingual, immigrant families. Despite my best efforts to be mindful of the gaps in my knowledge, I am certain that there were times when I asked the wrong question, responded to the teachers in ways that revealed my ignorance, and drew misguided connections due to the

limitations of my perspective. Urban, (1998) reflecting on the limitations of his work as a white academic writing the biography of an African American educator, explained:

It is a time when African Americans are reclaiming themselves in a variety of ways from the shackles of their White oppressors. One of the sites of this reclamation project is the scholarly arena where Whites who study Blacks run an increasing risk of alienating Black audiences by misunderstanding and misrepresenting their subjects. (p. 105)

While I will never be able to overcome completely the limits of my perspective, I have tried to build space in our conversations for the participating teachers to share their perspectives on my ideas. I believe that such collaborative knowledge building enriches my work and helps to address, if not overcome, some of the limitations of my knowledge.

Another piece of identity that I bring to this work is that of a teacher. Before I was a parent, I was a teacher in an afterschool program serving elementary school aged children. The schedule and structure of our program as well as the orientation we had toward our students' families supported us in building genuine, collaborative relationships with parents. Despite all these things in my favor, I found the work of forging relationships with families to be by far the most challenging aspect of my work. Additionally, through conversation with the families of my students I learned that many of them did not have strong relationships with their classroom teachers, and that in some cases the relationship was outright adversarial. Initially I felt frustrated with the children's teachers for their apparent lack of desire to work on building this important relationship. However, as I began my doctoral studies, I began to understand the historical context of the relationship between families and schools which casts a long shadow over the work of teachers today. As well, current policies and practices create complicated circumstances that teachers face in the present. These two factors stymie even a well-intentioned teacher in their

efforts to foster relationships with families. Nonetheless, I do hold teachers to an expectation that they should at least strive to foster relationships with families. In my interviews and in the group discussion I occasionally felt frustrated when hearing the teachers communicate a different orientation toward their work with families. Despite this frustration, I made every effort to be guarded in my emotional reaction to these views so that I could better hear and learn from the teachers' experiences and perspectives.

In addition to my experiences as a teacher I am also a parent of two young children. During the time that I was engaged in this research my older son was attending a Montessori preschool and then a local public school and my younger son entered Montessori preschool. After years of thinking about the relationship between home and school from the teacher's perspective, it was fascinating, gratifying and at times painful to experience that relationship from my perspective as a mother. This new identity has forced me to think deeply about the power dynamics between teachers and parents, to work hard on making my own communication with my children's teachers respectful, and to understand the relationship from a more nuanced and complex perspective. I have had conversations with my son's teachers and with other parents at my son's school in which issues of pedagogy and parenting are on the surface while issues of race, religion, and class are woven underneath. Having had these experiences both as a parent *and* a teacher I bring a particular orientation, a set of beliefs, and an even longer set of questions to the work of investigating the relationship between teachers and families. Though this perspective informs me as I shape my questions, the particularity of my experiences must also be understood as a factor that limits my study.

CHAPTER 3 • AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE CEDAR SCHOOL

All accounts, it seems, are partial; thus all perception might be said to be tentative, an opportunity for interpretation, a guessing game.
(Doty, 2010, p. 5)

There are many ways to construct a history of a school, all of them incomplete. My purpose in writing an *oral history*, rather than a more traditional history, of the Cedar School was not to capture a complete or objective history of the school, for I would argue, as Doty has, that such a task is impossible. My purpose in constructing this oral history was to document how the participating teachers in my study made sense of the founding and growth of the school, changes in leadership, the evolution of Cedar's educational philosophy and practices, as well as larger shifts in educational policy that have impacted the school. As Chase (2010) elucidated, "Historians use *oral history* to describe interviews in which the focus is not on historical events themselves — historians traditional interest — but rather on the meanings that events hold for those who lived through them." (p. 209) Before discussing the teachers' work with families at Cedar, it was necessary to document their understanding of the context in which they have worked. My construction of this oral history has been created exclusively from the recollections of the teachers. Williams (2012) cautioned against the "perils of memory" (p. 156) when relying on the accounts of individuals in constructing an oral history. He warned, "memories are rooted in emotion and perspective," (p. 157) which often results in an unreliable account of facts. Additionally he explained that this telling would likely be colored by the feelings elicited in recalling events. For the purpose of this study, however, I consider these qualities of oral history to be an asset. In exploring the question of how teachers' life and professional histories have shaped their approach to working with families, I have been most interested in documenting the

“emotion and perspective” of the teachers’ understandings of the school’s history, rather than an account of the facts. This oral history will serve to represent not the “truth” of the school’s history, but the teachers’ experiences of the school as a context in which they have lived and worked.

My method for collecting this history was to gather from several sources. The primary source was interviews with the teachers. (For brief, demographic information about the participating teachers, see Table 2.2 in Chapter 2. For more detail see Chapter 4 on the Teachers’ Narratives.) Daniela^{*}, one of the founding teachers of the Cedar School routinely referred to the school as a living being that was birthed by multiple mothers. The school was born, nurtured, came of age, and matured. Throughout this process it has suffered the inevitable growing pains. What follows is an attempt to document how the teachers have experienced the process of growing the school.

Some of the teachers’ description of Cedar’s history came out organically in my interviews with them about their life and professional experiences. These interviews were all recorded and transcribed and yielded many of the direct quotes included in this chapter. Where I felt I needed more specifics from individual teachers about their experiences at the school I followed up with a shorter, targeted interview over the phone. In these interviews I guided them through a loose set of questions asking them to recall their impression of chapters in the school’s history. (e.g. *Who was the principal when you began working at the school? How would you describe the approach to teaching and learning during their tenure? What was the role of families during their tenure? Why did that principal leave? What was the transition like to the*

^{*} Note: Pseudonyms have been used throughout this history for the school’s name, all teachers, administrators and family members. Notable public figures and scholars (e.g. Michael Bloomberg, Deborah Meier, Patricia Carini) are named because the reputation of their work is well known and integral to the story.

next principal? These questions were repeated up to their impressions of the present.)

Additionally, as an interested observer of the school over many years, I have visited the school a number of times, spending time in the individual teachers' classrooms during normal school days as well as on special occasions (e.g. Curriculum Night and Family Brunch.) My fieldnotes from these observations also contributed to my understanding of the trajectory of the school's history. For archival documents, I began by reviewing anything the teachers elected to share with me. Daniela, in particular, described herself and was acknowledged by the other teachers as a keeper of the school's history. In this capacity she elected to share with me some documents, including drafts of the schools' handbook where Cedar's mission and vision for the future were articulated. The school handbook was distributed to families as a means of communicating the school's approach to teaching and learning. Additionally, Daniela shared excerpts of the school's proposals to the NYC Board of Education and later Department of Education requesting support for their continued growth as a school. During the course of our interviews, several of the teachers referred to news coverage of contentious times in the school's history. This coverage included articles in the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times as well as video documentation of demonstrations held outside of the school that were available on Youtube. In referring to these sources, the teachers recommended that I review this coverage for confirmation of events and a perspective on the school's struggles. I reviewed all these documents, both archival and news reports with from the perspective that it seemed to be important to the teachers that I include these sources in shaping my understanding of the school's history. It seemed to me that these materials served two purposes. First to confirm the integral role that families had played in the school's history, and in doing so to show alignment between the teachers and families over the course of this time. Again, my data collection on the school's history was not

exhaustive. I did not formally interview parents or any of the principals, though I have had informal dealings with both. My goal in constructing this oral history of the school from the perspective of the teachers was to understand how they have experienced the school as a context for their professional lives.

Beginnings: The Small Schools Movement in New York City

The Cedar School is one of an informal network of small, alternative, progressive, public schools that were established in New York City in waves between the 1970s and 1990s. Prior to that time, independent schools were the primary sites of more alternative, progressive pedagogy, and most public schools followed a more traditional approach. Deborah Meier, who founded Central Park East schools in East Harlem in 1974, and other like-minded educators sought to create progressive public schools that would serve New York's diverse student population. (Meier, 1995.) At the same time, formal and informal networks of progressive educators met throughout the city on a regular basis, and their work supported the foundation of these new, alternative, public schools. In New York City these networks included the Elementary Teachers Network working out of Lehman College in the Bronx, educators working with Lillian Weber's Workshop Center at City College, the New York City Writing Project, and the National Center for Restructuring Education Schools and Teaching (NCREST) at Teachers College. As well progressive educators met nationally through the North Dakota Study Group and the Prospect School's Summer Institutes and Teacher Training programs. Through these networks, progressive minded educators encouraged each other to take advantage of a climate of possibility within the New York City Board of Education to establish multiple schools grounded in progressive values. Daniela recalled that Meier actively encouraged teachers from this

progressive network to capitalize on this opportunity to establish additional schools in New York City. Daniela recounted an interaction between Meier, herself and Andrea, the founding Teacher-Director of Cedar,

She said, "You guys need to start new schools." And Andrea and I looked at each other like, "What is she talking about?" And Debbie says, "Really. I don't know what else to tell you." So, Andrea says, "Let's do it." And I say, "Ok. Let's do it." (Interview transcript)

Cedar's teachers described the school's approach to curriculum and pedagogy as being grounded in the history of progressive education. Though all the teachers used this term, my sense in talking to the teachers about their work was that they each defined what it means to be a progressive educator somewhat differently. Certainly in the history of progressive education, this term has been applied and understood in a variety of ways. For the purpose of understanding the philosophical grounding of the Cedar School, however, it is important to note some of the ways that a progressive approach to education differs from more traditional approaches to teaching and learning. Many progressive educators cite the work of John Dewey, often considered the grandfather of progressive education, whose writing on matters of curriculum and pedagogy illustrated the practices and benefits of this approach. Other terms applied to this genre include approaches described as child-centered, experiential, inquiry-based, project-based, and involved in developing emergent curriculum. In the progressive tradition, teachers see themselves as facilitators of children's learning. They do this in contrast to a more traditional, teacher centered philosophy in which teachers imagine themselves as keepers of all knowledge to be dispensed piecemeal to students, as Freire (1970) critiqued with his metaphor of The Banking Method of education. Philosophically progressive schools are grounded in a belief that all children can

learn, but that each one learns differently. As such, it is paramount that teachers develop a process for knowing the learners in their classrooms. Progressive educators believe that traditional schools offer a narrow view of education, one that cannot possibly nurture the different learning styles of all children. In progressive schools curriculum is not bought off the shelf but constructed and negotiated through some sort of partnership between the teachers and students. How that partnership is balanced varies widely from school to school. Many progressive schools emphasize the importance of play, hands-on, experiential learning, and fieldtrips in the community. In some settings a progressive approach to curriculum and pedagogy has resulted in vibrant engaged learning communities, where students and teachers are seen actively working together to build knowledge. One critique of progressive education has been that in some settings, teachers citing progressive values consider their teaching to be so “child centered” that they abdicate their responsibility for facilitating this process (Ravitch, 2000). This misunderstanding of the role of the teacher can lead to chaos and disengagement on the part of the learners. I would argue, however, that this is a misapplication of the term progressive, which is simply used to mask poor teaching. Successful progressive educators, far from being less involved in the teaching and learning process, work exhaustively to tailor experiences that will resonate for each child in their class.

Cedar’s particular commitment to progressive pedagogy is manifested in the language of school’s mission statement, which reads,

The [Cedar] School believes that all children come to school with a desire to make sense of the world. Our school provides a safe environment in which children can experiment, reflect, develop understanding, make connections, and become active participants in their own learning. They work to accomplish this on a daily basis, by engaging with materials,

through their own inquiry and by following their own innate curiosity towards the goal of becoming lifelong learners. The focus of the school is on the learner, both adults and child, as we encourage everyone to use their minds well. The adults of the community, educators and families, develop and celebrate each persons strengths and talents.

(School Handbook)

It was clear that from the outset Cedar sought to distinguish its approach to curriculum and pedagogy as distinct from the traditional public school approach. The above text emphasized the capacity of the child, and the responsibility of the adults, both parents and teachers, to foster experiential opportunities for children to pursue their own process of making sense of the world around them. To illustrate how this approach was manifested at Cedar, Estelle described her process for developing curriculum in her first years at the school. During these years Estelle would spend the first month of each school year offering the students a wide variety of hands-on learning experiences. After spending a month of observing the interests and dispositions of this particular class of learners, Estelle would then proceed to build a map of the years' curriculum. Estelle's practice of using observations of children to inform her process of developing curriculum drew on her work with the Descriptive Inquiry processes of the Prospect Center (Carini, 2001) and was grounded the values of the Child Study Movement (Antler, 1987; Kliebard, 1995). Additionally, Estelle's process for developing curriculum included frequent formal and informal communication with families on the subject. Adaptations to her curriculum were based on input from families. This practice was consistent with the Cedar School's mission, which characterized children and adults co-constructors of knowledge. This emphasis on the growth and development of teachers capable of learning alongside children and their colleagues

would also be reflected in the school's approach to professional development, described later in this chapter.

The policy context in New York City

Before going further into the founding of the Cedar School, it is important to briefly discuss the larger system of education, which has provided a context for the school and has surely had an impact on its trajectory. Although the Cedar School was born out of the small schools movement in New York City, it has come of age in a very different educational climate. Shortly after coming into office in 2002, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg signed into law a bill that would grant him unprecedented control over the city's public school system. Initially, Bloomberg's effort to establish Mayoral Control received praise from such esteemed education scholars as Diane Ravitch (2010) who welcomed it as an antidote to a flawed system. Seen now in retrospect, however, Bloomberg's reforms to the New York City school system have drawn criticism from many varied sources (Ravitch, et. al. 2009). A self made billionaire, Bloomberg planned to apply his business acumen to the problem of solving the crisis in New York's system of public education. To begin this project, Bloomberg appointed Joel Klein, a lawyer with little knowledge of educational issues, as his first school's chancellor. As Ravitch (2010) reflected,

The general perception was that the mayor planned to run the school system like a business, with standard operating procedures across the system. Klein surrounded himself with noneducators, most of whom were lawyers, management consultants, and business school graduates. Many of the young aides to the chancellor were only a few years out of

college or graduate school and had no experience in education but received six figure salaries. (p. 73)

Though interest in establishing mayoral control over urban school systems had been brewing in the prior decade, Bloomberg's move to institute Mayoral Control echoed efforts at the national level by the Bush Administration which centralized power over the nation's schools through the broad reaching, federal mandates of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act of 2001.

Since assuming control over the school system, Mayor Bloomberg and his chancellors instituted many system-wide changes, enforced by new forms of accountability and assessment. These new structures were put in place with the ostensible goal of improving a system that all would agree faced many challenges. To oversee decisions affecting the schools, Bloomberg replaced the old Board of Education structure with the Panel for Educational Policy (PEP). The PEP is comprised of thirteen members, eight of whom are appointed by Bloomberg and five of whom are appointed by the Borough Presidents of each of New York's five boroughs. The PEP meets regularly at open forums where the public is invited to speak briefly to issues that the panel will be voting on, e.g. changes in policy, school closures, etc. Critics of the PEP, including Patrick Sullivan (2009), the Manhattan Borough President's appointee to the panel, are quick to note that this body frequently votes with an eight to five split on many issues. The frequency with which mayoral appointees vote together lends credence to criticism that the panel is simply in place to give New York City families a sense of "symbolic democracy" (S. Allen, personal communication, March 31, 2011). Describing New York City parents' introduction to the PEP's approach to governance of the school system, Ravitch (2010) wrote, "Parents realized that there was no public forum in which their views would be heard or heeded." (p. 79) Though PEP

meetings offer the public an opportunity to speak, their input rarely, if ever, seems to have any impact on the outcome of the vote.

Under the mantle of centralization, Bloomberg was able to institute a number of controversial new policies that mirrored the educational reforms being introduced at the federal level. As this is a school history and not history of recent changes in educational policy, I will not cover all of the changes seen at the local and federal level during the last decade. Suffice it to say that during this time those with power over educational policy, Bloomberg, Bush and Obama, have pushed forward a number of mandates under the mantle of accountability. The implication of the language employed in recent policies and platforms suggested that prior to these contemporary reforms, teachers had never before been held accountable for students' academic success. This view is clearly widely held and frequently cited as evidence of the success of such reforms. In celebrating the accomplishments of districts under mayoral control, researchers Wong & Shen (2009) documented a rise in NYC students' test scores under Bloomberg as evidence of the success of this system. The language of these new policies suggested that now, under the watchful eye of politicians and policy-makers, teachers and schools would finally be held solely responsible for problems such as the "achievement gap." The implications undergirding these policies suggested that the only effective way to measure student learning was through the use of standardized tests. This shift in assessment practices clearly implied a belief that teachers themselves could not be trusted to know whether or not their students were learning.

In New York City, evidence of this distrust of teachers was formalized early on in the era of Mayoral Control. Bloomberg's first reform plan rolled out in 2003 echoed the rhetoric of NCLB under the title Children First, which suggested, perhaps, that in the past, students' needs

had been secondary. During this first wave of reform an item at the top of Bloomberg's agenda was to end the policy of "social promotion." Again, the implication underlying the challenge to this policy was a distrust of teachers to determine whether or not children were learning. This rhetoric of accountability was invoked to justify what many have seen as a narrowing of curriculum in order to focus on the subjects that children are tested in, namely English Language Arts (ELA) and Math. While this change in assessment may have resulted in children becoming increasingly competent test takers, there is necessarily a concern for what has been lost in the process. In a report by K. K. Manzo in Education Week (2008) scholars criticized the practice weighing the results of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests heavily when assessing schools. The article cites the criticism,

'When you focus only on basic academic skills, you create incentives to redirect all the attention and resources away from broader goals to narrow academic skills,' said Richard Rothstein, a research associate at the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington based think tank. 'What gets measured gets done. The idea is that we're not going to restore balance to our schools unless we measure all those things that we expect schools to do.'

(Manzo, 2008)

While policy makers have argued that they never intended the increased stakes attached to tests to effect teaching and learning, any public school parent will tell you that the schooling of this generation of children has included an increase in the amount of test preparation when compared to past decades.

Once the Bloomberg administration was able to shift the power from teachers to tests to determine whether or not children were learning, they instituted several new practices aimed at using the tests to evaluate teachers and schools. For the purpose of this study involving teachers

at the Cedar School, the most impactful new practice has been the institution of School Progress Reports. During the course of my interviews with Cedar's teachers, several cited the Progress Reports as being responsible for what they have experienced as a dramatic shift away from the school's progressive roots. In brief, the School Progress Reports are derived from annual calculations of the school's data, which results in each school receiving a letter grade ranging from A to F. A school's grade is determined primarily by calculating both the school's base performance and progress in raising test scores from year to year. This figure comprises 85% of the school's grade. The other 15% is based on the school's attendance records (5%) and the results of school wide Learning Environment surveys of parents, teachers, and, in upper grades, students (10%). Schools are eligible to receive "extra credit" when their student populations include a certain percentage of students who are determined to be higher needs, e.g. emergent bilinguals, students in special education, etc. The annual practice of releasing the School Progress Reports has been met with much consternation from among New York City's families, teachers, and school administrators, particularly as so little weight (10%) is given to the self-assessment provided by the school community.

In addition to public concerns that the Progress Reports do not give enough weight to children's and families' assessments in evaluating the quality of their schools, the practice of grading the schools has been open to additional criticism because the formula for establishing grades has been inconsistent from year to year (Pallas & Jennings, 2009). My brief quantitative study of the Progress Reports compared the grades given in the first two years. This analysis revealed a not insignificant difference of grade distributions from the first to the second year.

Table 3.1

**NYC K-5 SCHOOLS – PROGRESS REPORT GRADES
2006/07**

	Frequency	Percent
Valid A	127	21.7%
B	225	38.5%
C	156	26.7%
D	51	8.7%
F	26	4.4%
Total	585	100.0%

Table 3.2

**NYC K-5 SCHOOLS – PROGRESS REPORT GRADES
2007/08**

	Frequency	Percent
Valid No grade*	4	.7%
A	262	44.8%
B	221	37.8%
C	73	12.5%
D	16	2.7%
F	9	1.5%
Total	585	100.0%

How could so many schools have changed their student outcomes so dramatically from one year to the next? In the fall of 2008, when the second year of Progress Reports were released, Mayor Bloomberg was lobbying to be considered for a third term in office. Perhaps the change in the formula for calculating Progress Reports grades served Bloomberg's political aims, when offered as evidence of the improvement of NYC schools under his tenure. Pallas & Jennings (2009) in their analysis of the role of Progress Reports during the Bloomberg administration concluded,

“Evaluating how schools are performing might be useful, but not, we suggest, if it is done poorly. In our analysis the Progress Reports produce results that are unreliable, confusing, and create unintended negative consequences.” (p. 99) It has clearly been important for the DOE to refine their method of assessing schools. However the process of calculating, assigning, and publicizing grades for schools through the Progress Reports has felt highly punitive and stressful for children, their families, and their teachers. It is in the context of this contentious climate that the Cedar School has struggled in recent years. The following chart documents the school’s Progress Report grades since 2007, when the new system of evaluation was introduced.

Table 3.3

Cedar School Progress Reports 2006-2012	
2006-07 School Year	F
2007-08 School Year	B
2008-09 School Year	A
2009-10 School Year	B
2010-11 School Year	C
2011-2012 School Year	F

A school is born

The Cedar School is located in Riverview, a vibrant, leafy, New York City neighborhood whose population for the last several decades has been predominately from the Dominican Republic. Signage in local shops and restaurants is often bilingual (in Spanish and English) and many Cedar families speak both languages at home. As with many New York City neighborhoods in recent years, the trend of gentrification has changed Riverview’s demographics somewhat, though the neighborhood continues to be predominately Dominican.

Fuelled by the sense of inspiration and opportunity of small schools movement (Arrastía & Hoffman, 2012), the Cedar School was established in 1993. As described by the founding teachers, the impetus to establish the school came initially from a small group of politically connected, white, middle-class parents who sought to create a progressive, alternative public school option in their neighborhood where none currently existed. The establishment and growth of Cedar mirrored a trend throughout the city during the decades that preceded and followed the school's founding (Stillman, 2012). Prior to the establishment of the school, parents in the neighborhood seeking a more child centered approach to teaching and learning would apply for variances to send their children to progressive public schools in other New York neighborhoods. Cedar teachers described the “power parents” (a phrase introduced independently of each other by several of the teachers in our one-on-one interviews) that were involved in establishing the school as being middle class, highly educated, and mostly white. When I queried Daniela to describe those founding parents she replied that they included,

Two white women who worked together and had a law firm together. One was married to a guy who used to teach at City College. The other one was a single mom of three boys. They were really the school board members. So they were the most powerful in the group. But they were smart enough to make sure that the group was very diverse. So they had an African American woman. They had a small group of Latina moms. But they were pretty much really running the show. (Interview transcript)

Though both I and the teachers referred to “parents” in our interviews, the parents most actively involved in the narrative of the school's history were mothers. The gendered and class-based nature of parent participation in the lives of schools is consistent with other scholarship in this area (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Reay, 1998).

According to the teachers' recollections of the founding of the Cedar School, founding parents approached the local superintendent and offered to support his campaign to get re-hired by the school board in exchange for help in establishing a progressive early childhood classroom at the local school. Once they were successful in their bid to get the superintendent re-hired they increased their original request and told him they wanted a whole school. The superintendent granted them permission to start a new program headed by a Director instead of a Principal to operate within an existing school building. Once they had approval for their plan, the parents began looking for a Director to start the school. The first staff member of the fledgling school was Teacher-Director Andrea Jacobs, a white, progressive teacher and administrator who had worked for years at River East, one of the progressive schools borne out of the CPE network. Throughout her time at Cedar, Andrea held the title of Teacher-Director, which described her role as both administrator but also art teacher for the new school. As the early phase of the standards movement, which would later inspire NCLB, began to gain traction in the early 1990s, progressive educators joined together to work actively to argue for alternative approaches to teaching, learning, and assessment. These educators met and worked together at organizations such as the Coalition of Essential Schools, the Center for Collaborative Education, and National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching (NCREST) established in 1990 by Linda Darling Hammond and Ann Lieberman at Teachers College. In 1992 Andrea took a year of sabbatical from River East, during which time she collaborated with colleagues at NCREST who were also working to envision and establish alternative public schools. As fellow, small schools founder Beverly Falk recalled, many of the schools in this second wave of the small schools movement included the word "new" in their names, a double entendre intended to refer to José Martí's assertion that "A new world requires a new kind of school." (B. Falk, personal

communication, 12/7/12) Daniela recounted that Andrea spent the year of her sabbatical from River East developing a whole school curriculum based on anti-bias and inclusive approaches to education. The Cedar parents were impressed with Andrea's educational philosophy and social commitments and hired her as the Teacher-Director, charged with building up the staff of the school. As Daniela recalled, one afternoon Andrea visited River East and, drinking coffee together in her van parked outside of the school, asked Daniela to join her in founding the new school. Daniela recalled,

[Andrea] says, "I've been interviewed by a group of parents up in Riverview. And they want to offer me the job as director of this school. And I think I want to take it. I don't think I'm coming back." And she says, "You know Debbie's rule is you only get to take one person with you, and I'd like you to come." And I was— And I really didn't think about it that much. I said, "You know, that sounds great." I said, "All I want is if you can get me a classroom on the first floor with a backyard, to the playground. I'm yours. That's my price." (Interview transcript)

Meier's encouragement to local progressive educators to establish new schools was tempered with a concern that their departures not destabilize existing schools. Once Daniela became involved she and Andrea worked to find new staff for the school. One of their first hires was Anita, who had been assigned to Daniela's room at River East for one week of fieldwork observations for her coursework in bilingual education at City College. Recalling the experience of being an observer in Daniela's room, Anita explained,

I spent, I think, a week in her class observing. And I was just so impressed with all the work she was doing. And I saw kindergarten kids, Pre-K, I think it was, Pre-K/K, making books and reading. And I was just— I couldn't believe what I saw. (Interview transcript)

Anita's sense of wonder and possibility when encountering Daniela's unfamiliar approach to pedagogy was palpable as she recounted the experience of being in Daniela's classroom. Though Anita's assignment in Daniela's classroom was brief, both experienced an instant sense of rapport. Daniela was especially impressed that Anita eschewed the role of observer and quickly became an active participant in the work of the classroom. When considering prospective staff for Cedar, Daniela contacted Anita to ask if she would be interested in joining the staff of the new school as an assistant in her early childhood classroom the following fall. Anita spent her first two years at Cedar as a paraprofessional in Daniela's classroom while completing coursework toward her certification at City College. By the 1995 she was credentialed to have her own classroom and has been a lead teacher in early childhood ever since.

It is notable that the first teachers hired to work at Cedar were bilingual, Latina teachers. Though the school was not designated bilingual, given the demographics of the surrounding community, the school's founders recognized the need to staff the school with bilingual teachers. These teachers could be counted on to have particular expertise in considering the needs of Spanish speaking students at the school. Additionally, these teachers who were from similar though not the same ethnic and cultural roots as the majority of families in the neighborhood, might have also been counted on to "translate" their understandings of and commitments to progressive pedagogy to working class, Latino families for whom this approach to schooling might seem unfamiliar (Semel & Sadovnik, 1999). The necessity for progressive teachers to explain and justify their unfamiliar approaches to teaching and learning was certainly not exclusive to teachers at the Cedar School. This process of "translation" was required even of teachers at private, progressive schools such as the Dalton (Semel, 1992). Many of Cedar's teachers were themselves the product of New York City's traditional, public schools and their

sense of the limitations of traditional schools was grounded in this personal history. The second half of the Cedar's mission statement included the following assertion:

The Cedar School is committed to mirroring the diversity of the community within our classrooms, both in student population and teaching staff. We believe this combination of emphasis on the individual and responsibility to the families of [Riverview] brings together the most positive aspects of a community based school of choice. (School Handbook)

Over the years, the school continued to prioritize hiring teachers of color. The majority of teachers have always been women of color, mainly African American and Latina, though these demographics have shifted for the first time in the last two years as a number of veteran, Latina teachers have left the school and been replaced by white teachers. Though most of Cedar's teachers had not themselves been educated at progressive schools, once they had been introduced to this different model of teaching and learning they described being moved by the possibilities it represented.³

When Cedar opened its doors in 1993 it was housed on one floor of an existing public school. The school had five classrooms and all classes contained mixed grade groupings, three were combined K & 1st grade and two were 2nd & 3rd. This multi-age structure has its roots in progressive education and at Cedar was emblematic of a strong tenet of eldership, wherein older students' capacity to mentor younger students would be fostered. (The eventual move away from this structure will be explored later and was cited by the teachers as evidence of the school's evolution away from its progressive roots.) Though the school's first location was always

³ Anecdotally, I have observed that many of other progressive, public schools in New York City are more often staffed by white teachers whose educational histories include attending progressive schools. Again, this observation is merely anecdotal, but it was this contrast that initially drew my interest in the unique circumstances at the Cedar School.

intended to be temporary, conflicts over shared space were a source of great tension with the co-located school. Anita's best friend from City College had been hired the same year to work at the school that Cedar shared a building with. She described the need to be extremely covert about their friendship for fear of angering the other school's principal. In its early years, Cedar was not officially a school, but a program within a school. It had no secretary, no administrative staff, other than Andrea, who as Teacher-Director also taught Art. Any additional needs the school had were met by families. Daniela recalled that the school survived during those years in part due to, "A lot of parents doing everything, from washing things to building things" (Interview transcript). By 1995 Cedar had outgrown the space at in its existing building. While waiting for new space in its current home which was in the process of being built, teachers spent the year shuttling between two locations. During that year the teachers were very concerned that the school retain a sense of community, therefore frequent trips between the two locations for staff meetings and school wide events took place. In 1996 Cedar finally moved to its current location housed on one and a half floors of a building they share with another, public elementary school.

Professional development and work with families

In addition to supporting the school with their actual labor, families showed their commitment to the teachers and their work by volunteering to run enrichment clubs for the children every Friday afternoon. According to Daniela, parents representing the range of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and class diversity that composed the school population were all actively involved in supporting the teachers and the school through their volunteerism. This support enabled the teachers to have weekly staff meetings to discuss and develop curriculum and to share observations of specific learners in their classrooms. Daniela recalled,

[The parents] would take the kids and do clubs, which was something that CPE used to do, for a couple of hours on Friday afternoon. And we would meet for those two hours, doing Primary Language Observation and Recording. And sharing. It was like a staff meeting every week. *Two hour*. And it was like a work session, you know? Put your observations together, discuss them, share them and let's plan for next week... So we were studying this whole business of assessment and how to record and describe.

(Interview transcript)

Irene recalled these weekly staff meetings as highly collegial, where any changes in practice or policy were discussed in a circle so that all voices were considered as the group worked toward consensus. She explained, "We, as a group, talked it through until we arrived at something that we all could live with... Nobody felt like something had just happened to them, that somebody had dropped a ton of bricks on them" (Interview transcript). Investment in this consensus-based decision making process came out of the teachers' sense of collective ownership over the education of every Cedar student. Irene explained that large and small adaptations to the school practices had to be justified for all the teachers, because of a shared belief that, "They're not just our kids. They will be someone else's next year" (Interview transcript). Estelle echoed this sentiment when describing her impressions of learning community that was palpable to her in the first years at the school. When identifying the many things that made Cedar distinctive, Estelle explained that she was struck when she joined the staff in 1997 to experience,

The connection between staff. People didn't always get along. They didn't always agree. But what bonded us was this common sense of what we believed was right for kids... The ease with which kids learned things and just kind of fell into curriculum because I was letting them take the lead. The way in which kids formulated and sustained

friendships. The focus on the whole child. The focus on, ‘We’ve gotta do something for your brain, but we’ve also gotta make sure your social-emotional stuff is taken care of as well.’ (Interview transcript)

Another way that Cedar parents were integral in supporting the teachers in the development of their practice was to approve the scheduling of monthly professional development sessions. To allow these meetings to happen, parents voted through a process governed by the Teachers Union called a School Based Option (SBO) to allow the teachers to dismiss their students at noon once a month on a Wednesday. These Wednesday afternoons would be filled with a varied slate of professional development workshops, occasionally offered by an expert from outside the school but most often led by school staff. Each month four or five workshops were offered, and might include a session on how to work with a particular arts material or a new strategy for assessing reading or math. Teachers could sign up in advance for individual sessions and afterward the whole staff would meet to reflect on their learning. This approach to professional development echoed the school’s mission, which recognized that adults, like children, should be recognized as life long learners. As a school wide practice this approach was prioritized by the first two school leaders but was quickly abandoned by the third principal. In addition to these weekly and monthly working sessions, teachers participated in an annual retreat at the Fall Conference of the Prospect Center, where they presented narratives of their teaching practice or work with specific children. Cedar parents were welcomed to attend and were occasionally present at all of these types of working sessions.

Though many of these structures have fallen by the wayside, one practice related to parents that has remained consistent is the expectation of full participation by all parents and children at parent teacher conferences. Since the school was founded, a policy has been in place

that all families must attend parent teacher conferences with their children. Cedar staff's adherence to this policy mirrored the long-time practices instituted by other progressive public and private schools such as Central Park East and the Dalton School. Teachers describe being dogged in their attempts to insure that they meet with every family, sometimes scheduling two sessions for a child to accommodate parents' scheduling needs. These meetings served as goal setting sessions where each participant – parents, the teacher, and the child – articulated their goals for the child and followed up at a subsequent meeting by discussion of whether progress had been made towards those goals. This practice remains one of the few structures that have been maintained throughout many changes in leadership. Details about Cedar's approach to parent teacher conferences and other practices specific to the teachers' work with families will be described in depth in Chapter 5.

Changes in leadership

As with many schools and other institutions, challenges of leadership issues have plagued Cedar from the early days. After four years as Teacher-Director, Andrea was, depending on who you ask, fired or otherwise strongly pressured to leave by the superintendent. Teachers recall that during those four years Andrea was involved in constant battles over shared space, scheduling issues, and matters of curriculum. Daniela reported that for the first few years she was not even aware of the struggles Andrea was having,

I didn't know this until many years later that she was already having problems with the superintendent. But, in those days, the principal's job or the director's job was protect the teachers so that they can do what they have to do. It's your job to take care of the rest.

(Interview transcript)

Other teachers described Andrea as a tenacious advocate for the school who did not always know how to spin the politics of public opinion in her favor. Though initially the founding parents worked hard alongside Andrea to advocate on the school's behalf, by 1997 they were willing to concede to the superintendent's wishes to get rid of her. Daniela recalled, "Because parents have been so tired of fighting, fighting for everything, they sort of give him permission to get rid of Andrea. And it was pretty devastating" (Interview transcript). Following Andrea's departure the school was leaderless for a year. As Daniela explained, "So we pretty much run the school, literally without a director or principal, with the help of the parents for that whole year. From our classrooms" (Interview transcript). The discrepancies in the teachers' accounts of Andrea's departure recalls Williams (2012) caution against the "perils of memory" (p. 156) when constructing oral histories. However, for the purpose of understanding how the teachers' experienced these events, the "facts" of the story may be less important than the teachers' impressions of this period in Cedar's history. This period in the early years of the school left the school community feeling vulnerable and under siege from forces beyond their control.

After a leaderless year Lynda joined the Cedar School as its second Director. Under her tenure the school would move from being a program within a school to being recognized as a school under the control of its own principal. Housed in its new, permanent location the school would also add classrooms and enroll a substantially larger student population. These moves were experienced by some teachers as disruptive of the intimate and under-the-radar quality that Cedar enjoyed during the early years. According to Estelle, Lynda's experience with and knowledge of the Board of Education had given her a premonition of philosophical changes that were on the horizon. Estelle described that in order to allow the school to "stay afloat" and remain "out of the line of fire" (Interview fieldnotes) Lynda began implementing small changes

to the ways things were done to keep them in compliance with DOE expectations. Lynda's efforts, however, were met with trepidation and distrust by others on the school staff. During this period of transition a number of teachers left the school, either temporarily or permanently.

The impact of Lynda's tenure at the school is one that is highly contested. For some she remained the standard bearer of the school's progressive mission, working tirelessly to adapt the school to survive a changing educational climate while preserving its progressive roots. In the view of others, Lynda's leadership represented a caving to the Department of Education and an erosion of the very heart of the school's mission. Interestingly, however, though the teachers' conceptions of Lynda's leadership may be conflicting, this disagreement did not seem to have resulted in permanent fissures in their work and life friendships. There does not appear to be a division of the school into pro- or anti-Lynda camps dividing the staff today. How the teachers could hold such different views of Lynda's tenure may be explained in part by a particular quality in the culture of Cedar's community of teachers. During the course of my conversations with Cedar teachers, both individually and as a group, I noticed that the teachers placed a high value on the primacy of personal stories. Some of this value for story may have its roots in the practices of the progressive educators connected to the Prospect School, where the process of sharing recollections was used as a tool for collectively deepening an understanding of a concept (e.g. play, community, etc). During the course of my conversations with the Cedar teachers, it appeared that even strong philosophical disagreements between the staff do not escalate to argument. Instead, a teacher might present her contrasting perspective in the form of a story from her own practice, thereby embedding a different view of the topic within the personal narrative. Through enacting a shared belief in each person's right to the subjectivity of their personal

narrative, Cedar's teachers may have been better equipped to live and work alongside each other despite their sometimes contrasting perspectives on any number of events or issues.

Whatever their view of the effect of Lynda's tenure, the chronology and circumstances of her departure were not in dispute among the teachers interviewed for this oral history. In the fall of 2007 the first school Progress Reports were issued by the Department of Education. To the astonishment and dismay of the school community, Cedar was given an F. That the school would be graded so poorly came as a surprise. While many factors might have contributed, part of the explanation may be found by understanding the types of learners that composed Cedar's student body. In a conversation unrelated to the Progress Reports, Irene explained that over the years Cedar came to be known as a place that welcomed all kinds of learners, including those that might not have felt successful in a more traditional setting, where test taking and obedience were valued above other strengths. She explained,

We used to laugh about it and use the metaphor of the Statue of Liberty, 'Bring me your huddled masses.' Families came to us because they were unhappy with their previous school, with their emphasis on academic achievement. At Cedar the thinking was, 'You can learn in a happy environment. Just because you can't sit still we're not going to throw a net over you.' (Interview transcript)

The day that Cedar's F was announced, a spontaneous protest erupted outside the school. It included current and former students and families marching with signs and chanting their messages of support for the school. Some in the school community believed that the F grade emboldened the Department of Education with justification for their next action.

In the spring of 2008, after ten years of leadership at Cedar, Lynda was removed from her position at Cedar and escorted from the building by a representative of the DOE. Lynda's

removal came after a period of investigation by the DOE that included a number of meetings with the Parent Coordinator and Lynda regarding discrepancies in the school's lunch forms. So while Lynda's removal may not have come as a surprise to the school community, it seemed to have come as a shock. Following her removal, Lynda was barred from the school building during school hours and could only enter the building under the supervision of a DOE representative. Estelle recalled that after Lynda was removed school staff had a meeting with DOE officials who explained her discharge as follows, "What we were told was there was 'a difference of opinion regarding documentation of school funds'" (Interview fieldnotes). That was the official story. Among the teachers, the rumor was that Lynda had been falsifying school lunch forms. School lunch forms are completed by each family and collect data about household income to determine a child's eligibility for free or reduced price lunch. In turn, the DOE uses this data to calculate a school's poverty rate and make allocations of additional funding to high needs schools. The rumor was that a number of lunch forms from Cedar appeared to have been modified using white-out. Some teachers felt that Lynda's malfeasance in this area was symptomatic of larger issues in her overall mismanagement of the school. Others noted that her efforts, while not admirable, demonstrated her commitment to the school through her efforts to maintain a steady stream of funding. They noted that, in contrast with the limited resources they currently have, during Lynda's tenure their classrooms were well stocked and there was adequate money for valuable professional development sessions. While her actions resulted in serious consequences both for the school and herself, Lynda's behavior was reminiscent of a pattern in the history of progressive school leaders who were willing to push the boundaries of financial impropriety if it served the needs of their fledgling schools (Sadovnik & Semel, 2002).

Following Lynda's removal, the school was visited and supervised by a rotating cast of senior officials from the DOE, or, as Estelle described them, "non-stop guys," (Interview fieldnotes) who arrived to steer the school through the process of transition to the next principal. Some of these men held official roles; one acting briefly as interim principal, others simply visited regularly in no official capacity. The DOE officials who spent time at the school during this transition were generally people with whom the teachers already had a working relationship, e.g. curriculum specialists who had led professional development workshops with the school. As Daniela recalled,

Every day they would show up like sentinels... sort of helping to shepherd us through this very difficult situation. The superintendent comes to speak to us. Parents are told, 'Don't worry. We're going to protect you. We're going to protect you.' And they actually did. They did a really good job with that transition. (Interview, 8/11)

It is notable that Lynda's departure precipitated the arrival of a rotating cast of male supervisors to provide supervision and 'protection' to the mostly female school community of teachers and mothers. This dynamic was consistent with documentation of the history of schools where male supervisors often oversaw the work of women teachers (Blount, 1998; Prentice & Theobald, 1991; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Following these short-term substitutes, the school finished out the last few months of 2008 with a woman named Gloria in the position of acting principal. Gloria had been an Assistant Principal for a number of years at one of Cedar's sister schools, another small, progressive elementary school in the city. When she learned of the vacancy at Cedar she volunteered and also submitted her application to be considered in the hiring process for the permanent position. All of the teachers interviewed recalled being happy with Gloria, some more

enthusiastically than others, and all expected that she might be hired as she seemed a good fit for the school. They would soon be surprised to find that the DOE had a different plan in mind.

In New York City the hiring of a new public school principal is referred to as a C-30 process. The superintendent selects applicants from among the pool that apply to be considered by the hiring committee, which is comprised of members of the School Leadership Team (SLT). The SLT is made up of school administrators, such as the principal, as well as elected members from the teaching staff and the parent body, who each select their own representatives through a vote. While in the past, prospective principals may have come to schools through a variety of routes, starting as classroom teachers and then moving up through administrative positions, NYC public school principals today are mainly selected only after having completed training at the DOE's Leadership Academy. When the hiring process to replace Lynda got underway, many teachers believed that Gloria would be selected. They appreciated the work she had done at the school during the spring of 2008 and believed she would be a good fit for the school going forward. As Irene recalled, "We were all so sure she would be the nominee." (Interview fieldnotes) Though some veteran teachers requested that they be to be involved in the hiring process, Daniela asserted that the DOE took pains to insure that the hiring committee was comprised of only members of the SLT, and that their process was under the direction of the superintendent. Daniela noted that the teachers on the SLT at the time of the C-30 process were relatively new, young, white teachers. Though the hiring committee interviewed Gloria they did not select her. Instead they offered the job to Marek, a white man who had been groomed at the DOE's Leadership Academy but unknown to anyone in the school. Daniela recalled that the reason she heard that Gloria was passed over was explained as follows,

They say, 'She didn't do well in the interview. She didn't smile enough. She didn't give

eye contact. We like this other guy instead. You're gonna love him.' This guy comes out of nowhere.... Everybody was moved to the knees by his flashy smile and his blonde hair and blue eyes and tall. You know? And his charm. And they say to Gloria, who had lived there, started reorganizing things and putting things in place for two months, you know, 'You're not smart enough.' (*pause*) "And we want him instead.' And we're told basically, 'Oh, you're gonna love this new guy.' And we did *not* love this new guy...

(Interview transcript)

Though the young school had seen its share of dramatic episodes, the hiring of Marek plunged the Cedar School into the greatest chapter of turmoil yet.

The teachers described their initial impressions of Marek. During the first year he appeared affable yet lacking in vision for the school. At the first Curriculum Night in the fall of 2008 Marek conveyed a self effacing manner, explaining that he was there to learn from the teachers and family to understand how the school worked. One notable, though subtle difference in Marek's stance, however, was evident when he boasted that the school would be receiving a B on its Progress Report for the previous year, up from the F of the first year. In making this announcement, Marek lavished praise on specific teachers by name, e.g. singling out the reading coach for recognition of a boost in the ELA scores. Following Marek's introduction, the PTA co-presidents, one Latina the other a white woman, rose with their welcoming remarks. The mothers offered correction to Marek's view, clarifying that accolades for the increase to a B grade were deserved by *all* of Cedar's teachers and families. Through this shift in recognition, they emphasized that in the culture of the Cedar School accomplishments were recognized as an achievement shared by the whole school community. Though this exchange was personable, it would foreshadow of a much larger rift that would soon emerge between Marek and the rest of

the school community.

The teachers reflected that in the beginning Marek's leadership did not seem to represent a shift in the school's philosophy. As Estelle recalled,

He ran around smiling a lot. I remember that he told some inappropriate stories and had some disturbing behavior, including telling us about his gambling trips to Las Vegas. He seemed to be politicking. Doing a lot of 'getting to know you'. (Interview fieldnotes)

During this 'getting to know you' period, however, Marek apparently began maintaining confidential files on all the teachers, adding frequent observational memos that they were not allowed to review or discuss. Soon after his observations led to a practice of officially writing the teachers up regularly for what seemed to them to be minor infractions. (e.g. being several minutes late to pick their class up from a prep, or more than two days in a row of absence for an illness.) The fluid and collaborative relationships that the team of teachers shared in years past came under increasing surveillance by Marek. The teachers were particularly confounded by the fact that Marek's criticism of them did not seem to be backed by a strong vision for the school. Estelle reported, "It was never clear what his agenda was. His vision [for the school] was never clearly articulated." (Interview fieldnotes) Additionally, teachers soon began to share anecdotes with each other of what they felt was Marek's highly unprofessional behavior toward them.

Fairly soon into his tenure, Cedar's parents appeared to dislike Marek and as a consequence spent less and less time at the school. Teachers lost the collegial support of parents that they had grown accustomed to over the years. Additionally Marek quickly pulled funding for the school's work with the progressive Elementary Teachers Network, and disbanded the practice of their monthly professional development Wednesdays. As Marek began to subject the teachers to surveillance and erode the supports that they had come to rely on, Estelle described

that the school was overcome by a “culture of terror” (Interview fieldnotes). Though the teachers felt oppressed by Marek’s rule early on, they initially felt they had little recourse with the DOE to challenge his punitive and increasingly erratic behavior. Daniela explained,

It was very frustrating for me because I would say, ‘All they see is this white, blond, blue-eyed, male.’ And he’s so good at lying and being deceptive. And they look at us, these brown women. And they’re like, even though they know who we are, and we have the record, the track record– I guess they couldn’t admit, because Klein wouldn’t allow it, that this guy from the Leadership Academy was a bust. (Interview fieldnotes)

In his second year, Marek appeared to have lost patience with the teachers’ resistance to his more subtle changes in policy. As Estelle recounted, “in year two he came out like a lion” (Interview fieldnotes). The files that he had been maintaining to document the teachers’ infractions were used to build his case for giving the teachers unfavorable ratings. Many veteran teachers received U (Unsatisfactory) ratings for the first time in their careers. Cedar families, who had already felt unwelcome by Marek, began to be aware the oppression that the teachers were feeling. As a final straw, Marek’s attack on Ivana, a beloved special education teacher, galvanized the school community. Ivana had worked tirelessly to develop alternative assessments for her students and was wholly recognized by parents and staff as an outstanding and committed teacher. In the late spring, news came that Marek had given Ivana a rating of Discontinued (D), which would mean that she was fired from Cedar and unable to work again in the district. Further, Ivana would be at risk of losing her benefits.

Though the teachers had lived through the first year of Marek’s reign in fear, the second year brought the community of teachers and parents together for an empowering though exhausting collaboration. Estelle explained, “Parents began fighting to keep him off of us.”

(Interview fieldnotes) She recalled what she described as an awkward meeting of parents and teachers during which the parents questioned the teachers extensively asking for specific details of how they had been harassed. What teachers did not know at the time was that parents were also meeting regularly with their connections high up in the DOE and documenting a case to argue for Marek's dismissal. When they were not satisfied with the progress toward this end, Cedar's press savvy, "power parents" organized a series of public protests, documented the demonstrations with videos uploaded to youtube, and publicized the conditions at the school to reporters from the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. Though the teachers were moved by the parents' efforts to support them, they also worried about what would happen as this struggle continued to consume the school community. During the spring of 2010, the teachers felt their energy had been drained, taking their attentions away from their teaching. Finally in April, in response to the mounting pressure against him, Marek announced that he would be taking a position at a different school in the fall. In the last two months of his tenure, however, he continued to subject the teachers to punitive ratings and reports, which many felt were in retribution for their contribution to the effort to oust him.

In the fall of 2010, the Cedar community emerged from the events of the previous two years alive but shaken. When asked to recall the details of that time of transition, Irene chuckled, "I don't really remember him leaving. Isn't that funny?" (Interview transcript) as if she had blocked the memory of the trauma of that chapter in the school's history. Over the summer a C-30 process was convened and a new principal, an enthusiastic young man, was hired. Teachers recalled their first meeting with him during the summer, a long and productive session to discuss approaches to curriculum. They came away from that meeting with a positive sense of their new principal. However, just as quickly as they had met him, they were notified that he had been

placed at another school, and that a white woman named Ava was being appointed as Executive Principal, a new title within the DOE that the teachers reported being puzzled by. Ava was a graduate of the first cohort of the Leadership Academy and had a reputation as a highly regarded principal with great success at her previous school. Rather than convening a C-30 process to confirm her, senior officials at the DOE appointed Ava, sidestepping any process involving the school community. Not until the spring of 2012 was Ava's position officially ratified by the C-30 process.

Though the teachers were unified in their assessment of the Marek's incompetence, they remain divided on their evaluation of Ava and her leadership of the Cedar School. On paper and in person Ava expresses her commitment to the progressive values upon which Cedar was founded. She has gained the loyalty of old and new teachers alike by being a measured and thoughtful presence, seeming to value the core tenets of the school. Ginger, a new teacher, speaks with reverent enthusiasm for the ways that Ava is taking the progressive traditions of Cedar and adapting them to conditions in the current educational climate. As one of the school's founding mothers, Daniela waited until the end of Ava's first year to announce her decision to retire from teaching. Daniela repeatedly emphasized that, though she had reached retirement age, she would not have left Cedar if she did not feel the school was in good hands under Ava's leadership. She expressed confidence for Ava's commitment to the school's progressive roots, explaining that Ava "gets it."

Other teachers who have remained at the school seemed more measured in their assessment of the impact of Ava's leadership. In addition to Daniela's retirement, a number of other long time teachers left after her first year as principal, a fact that Estelle attributed to teachers' exhaustion at being "harassed and over-monitored" (Interview fieldnotes) in recent

years. Irene reported on several subtle shifts in the culture of the school during the last two years. She cited a change in professional development and staff meetings, which are now characterized by the kind of data driven practices favored by the DOE. When teachers meet now it may be to develop rubrics or compare student assessment data. Irene mused that Ava seems less concerned with the teachers having a strong sense of community and relationship and instead puts the needs of the children at the forefront of her energies. After the departure of many Cedar teachers at the end of the 2010-2011 school year, Irene described 2011-2012 as a “period of mourning.” (Interview fieldnotes). Nonetheless, she described the teachers who had replaced them as “a staff of keepers” and explained that in her estimation the school is “thriving” (Interview fieldnotes).

Family engagement at Cedar has been impacted through Ava’s implementation of a substantial shift in policy regarding parent volunteers. Irene reported with a sense of nostalgia that she observed a marked in the presence of families in the daily life of the school. The open door policy established by Andrea and carried forward during Lynda’s time has been replaced with a more formal process. Cedar parents must now apply to volunteer in the classrooms and are never permitted to volunteer in their own child’s class. As Irene explained, “It used to be that parents were just around. There’s a process for that now. As a result, there’s a more limited pool of involved families.” (Interview fieldnotes) When asked to speculate whether the changes to Cedar’s practices are a function of changes in leadership at the school or symptomatic of larger changes in the educational climate, all the teachers recognized these factors are likely intertwined. Irene speculated that the slow erosion of Cedar traditions and values are partly a function of waves of departures in staff. With a sense of poignancy she noted, “Once something is gone it is really hard to even begin to get it back. No one who’s had the experience of the thing is around anymore to fight for it” (Interview fieldnotes).

Of the teachers that I interviewed, only Estelle was highly critical of Ava and the changes at the school under her leadership. She recognized that changes at the school were also representative of larger shifts in thinking system-wide. In her twentieth year as a classroom teacher and her fifteenth year at Cedar, Estelle reported with a sense of acrimony and desperation, “I never thought I’d get to this point in my career, where I’d doubt who I am as a teacher, where I’d doubt my practice. It makes me feel like its time for me to leave the system” (Interview fieldnotes). Estelle’s feeling of hopelessness was compounded by the news that the school would receive an F on the School Progress Reports for the 2011/12 school year. The news devastated the school community. Estelle’s concerns with Ava’s leadership pre-dated the news of the F grade. During Ava’s first year Estelle reported being concerned that Ava appeared open to doing away with practices integral to Cedar’s structure. At the end of her first year Ava announced that the school would do away with the mixed grade grouping of the 2nd/3rd grade, a move Estelle felt represented a caving to pressure from parents. Anxious to have their children only focus on third grade material in preparation for their first year of high stakes, parents lobbied to abandon the practice of having mixed grade classrooms. When the school was founded in 1993, all grades were mixed age. Over the years 4/5 and then K/1 teachers presented and approved each other’s proposals to change to a practice of looping with their students for two years. In the past, such proposals were discussed by the whole staff with a goal of deliberating toward consensus. Now, the teachers note, major decisions are handed down from above. Irene explained, “Those kinds of conversations cannot be had anymore” (Interview fieldnotes). This change in governance and decision making at Cedar during the tenures of the last two principals mirrored the centralization of power throughout New York City’s system of public education. Estelle despaired that under Ava, “systems in place for assessment that we’ve

spent years developing were thrown in the garbage” (Interview, 9/12). She shared her frustration at the ways that she feels the teachers have been shut out of the decision making process at Cedar, lamenting “Conversations should be constructive, not destructive” (Interview fieldnotes).

In closing this most recent chapter in the history of the school, it is notable that the teacher who is most unequivocally confident about the direction of the school is Ginger, the newest teacher interviewed for this study. Ginger began teaching in the fall of 2010, fresh out of college and following a summer of coursework in teacher education with the New York City Teaching Fellows program. The Teaching Fellows program seeks to address a chronic teacher shortage at hard to staff schools and in high needs subjects, (e.g. math, special education) by selecting promising future teachers through a highly competitive application process. Teaching Fellows have impressive resumes, having been educated at highly regarded schools and many coming from successful careers in another field. Few, however, have any experience working in education. Teaching Fellows participate in intensive coursework during the summer before they enter the classroom and complete their degrees during their first two years of teaching, with their tuition covered by the Department of Education. The Fellows program has come under criticism for a number of reasons, including its failure to produce teachers that remain committed to teaching. After spending only one year in the classroom, Ginger ‘ascended’ to an administrative position as the coordinator of special education services for Cedar. Adding to her position of responsibility, when Daniela retired, Ava asked Ginger to take over her role of leading the school in its Weekly Gathering. Ginger reported being excited by the opportunity to adapt this event to align it more explicitly with the school-wide curriculum themes. Describing the change to this weekly tradition, Estelle explained that Weekly Gathering is “now less about kids sharing stories of what is important to them” (Interview transcript) and now serves as an opportunity to

demonstrate how the children are engaging with six, standardized units of study, which follow a consistent pacing calendar. It appears that in the eyes of the DOE and in the estimation of Ava as a school leader, teachers like Ginger represent the future of public education in New York City. With teachers like Daniela retiring from the system and Estelle losing hope of staying in the profession, Ginger may indeed be the new face of public education.

A final note about the changing role of families in Cedar's history

As this study seeks to understand how teachers' life and professional experiences shape their approach to working with families, I will close this oral history of the school with a final look at the role of parents in the evolution of the Cedar School. This section will focus most on the role of the so-called "power parents" whose actions have directly influenced the history of the school. The focus on these parents, who have been notably not the demographic majority at the school, is not meant to imply that their role has been more important in the life of the school. What bears examination, however, are the teachers' experiences of the ways that these power parents have leveraged their privileged positions to impact events and policies at the school. This dynamic is consistent with the findings of Lareau's research on the relationship between schools and families (Lareau, 1987; Lareau, 2000; Lareau, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). In the analysis of this relationship, Lareau engaged the theory of Bourdieu, which elucidated effect of the cultural capital that higher SES families bring to their dealings with their children's schools (Bourdieu, 1977; Swartz, 1997). Chapter 5 will describe the teachers' relationships with families who may not have not played as active a role in the schools' political battles and policy changes. In this chapter, it will be clear that a diverse group of families have been essential in contributing to energies to their children's education and in support of the school.

According to the teachers interviewed for this study, Cedar parents have played a critical role in the school's history. However, both Estelle and Daniela described the powerful role that parents played as a double-edged sword. While on the one hand these "power parents" could be counted on to act as the school's most tenacious advocates, the boundaries over who would make decisions for the school seemed to blur uncomfortably for the teachers. Daniela was explicit in her naming of class and racial politics that have contributed to that tension. She observed,

A problem that's persisted in the school for many years is how to help parents understand that you have a very important role to play, but it's not a parent run school. It's a teacher run school. Even though it's a collaboration, it is the teachers who are the professionals. Part of that was racial. Because it was a very diverse staff. There were more Latina teachers and Black teachers than there were white. And the parents, the power parents were white professional attorneys. So they felt like they could tell us what to do.

(Interview transcript)

Describing the shifts in educational policy that Cedar must contend with today, Estelle puzzled through what she experienced as a bitter irony the white middle class families who fought so tenaciously to preserve the progressive roots of the school in the early years are now leading the charge to cave to external pressure to standardize curriculum. Estelle recalled that when she began at Cedar, it was not unusual for parents to keep their kids out of school on testing days because they philosophically opposed the practice. When she was hired at Cedar, Estelle was struck by the contrast with her experiences at her old school,

I remember being applauded at Curriculum Night after I described what we'd be doing for the year. That moved me. It was, like, "Wow. That's never happened before."...Families were just so enamored of and supportive of the school philosophy. It

was all about, “We love the fact that they have tons of trips. We love the fact that they have recess. We love the fact that you guys let their questions drive the curriculum.” There was never any complaining. There was never any criticism of what you were doing. Undying support. (Interview transcript)

In a radical shift, Estelle noted that now it is the white, middle class parents who are leading the charge to make Cedar operate more like a traditional school. The recent campaign to abandon the practice of mixed-grade groupings and the push for greater standardization of curriculum were both led by white, middle class families. She reported that this year, for the first time in her work at Cedar, she and the other third grade teacher will be working from an identical curriculum map. Though Cedar’s teachers have always participated in a collaborative planning process they also always adapted the activities to respond to the needs and interests of the students in their classroom. When I asked Estelle to describe the shift she explained,

I think the thing that boggles my mind is when I first came to Cedar it was white, middle, class parents, just the middle class parents in general that were most supportive. And now that same group has done a 360°. And I’m still grappling with that. (Interview transcript)

As Estelle puzzled through this change she speculated that today’s parents may be responding to anxiety produced by the accountability movement in education reform. As the stakes for individual students have gotten higher, it appears that even families who might in the past have championed progressive education may no longer be willing to take a “risk” on progressive pedagogy with their children.

CHAPTER 4 • THE TEACHERS' NARRATIVES

In this chapter I have attempted to use the narratives gathered from my individual interviews with these five teachers to reconstruct a biographical sketch of each one. The goal here was to contextualize what will be described in Chapter 5, which focuses on the stories the teachers shared about their work with families. I began this process with the astonishingly naïve impression that constructing these biographies would be the easiest part of this process. If scores of research, writing, and theory on the challenges of biography had not disabused me of this notion, years of personal experience attempting to make sense of my own life history should have. In many ways this chapter has been the most challenging to construct, and I feel most vulnerable about my attempts. As such I would like to frame your reading in the following way. First, please realize that each of these women is much more complicated and wonderful than I could ever hope to capture on the page. As Mark Doty (2010) has eloquently written in his book on *The Art of Description*, the complexities of human experience seem to elude or actively resist the process of being committed to language. Additionally, as I quickly realized when I attempted to standardize a structure for constructing these narratives, the impossibility of applying a standard structure to five uniquely structured and narrated lives was impossible. Though the “data” for these biographies was generated from Interview transcripts that began from the same script, how each woman chose to narrate her life remained distinctively her own. Some participants hewed fairly obediently to my structures for constructing a life stories, while others, blessedly, defied my framework and spoke with greater eloquence than I could have hoped to elicit when I began this process. As a consequence you will note variation in each of the five

biographies, which, I have realized, is just as it should be. My hope is that these life stories will provide the reader with a rich, if only partial, context for understanding the teachers' work.

ANITA

Born and bred in Brooklyn to Puerto Rican parents, Anita has light cocoa colored skin, long dark hair and deep brown eyes. She is relatively tall woman, but when presiding over her room of at least two dozen kindergartners, Anita sits comfortably alongside them at low tables conferring with the young learners from her perch in a tiny chair. Anita's voice is soft and she speaks with both children and adults at a measured pace, taking long pauses when necessary to collect her thoughts before continuing. Her classroom feels full and busy but not chaotic. She moves unobtrusively between conferences with students at their tables, quick exchanges with teachers' assistants (often in Spanish), and roves around the classroom locating additional materials for the children as they work. At the end of the day Anita sends her students off with a quick hug or handshake and brief, warm exchanges with the parent or caregiver who has arrived to pick them up.

Anita was raised in East New York in Brooklyn by her mother and father, Puerto Rican immigrants who worked tirelessly to support her in her education. When asked to share her recollections of stories that her family told about their own schooling, Anita responded,

My parents did not finish high school. And so the story was more, "You need to go to school. I didn't have that opportunity. We want you to have that opportunity." I just remember, my mom always saying, you know, "I really enjoyed going to school, but I was the oldest of many siblings." And she was pulled out of school to help with chores and things like that. (Interview transcript)

Anita's parents communicated their commitment to her education by making it clear that her only job during childhood was to devote herself to her studies. She recounted their clear and persistent message to her, "'Don't worry about chores. You don't have to do chores... Just focus on your schoolwork. Forget about helping with washing dishes or this and that. Just focus on your schoolwork. That's your priority right now.'" (Interview transcript)

Throughout her school years, both of Anita's parents worked long hours in local factories, so a babysitter delivered her to and from school. Because of the obligations and lack of flexibility in their work schedules, Anita recalled that her parents were not able to be actively involved in the day-to-day life of her school experiences. She hesitated, however, to interpret this lack of presence in her school life as a lack of commitment to her education, explaining further,

From my point of view it seems like my parents were not very involved. But they cared a lot. They were not involved because they respected the teachers so much, that they thought— We don't need to, you know— Whatever they say that must be the correct thing. *(pause)* Also their fear of not speaking English. *(pause)* And I knew it was hard, 'cause they worked in factories. And taking a day off meant you didn't get paid. So attending family conferences was difficult. Or P.A. meetings. Or any meetings at all. But even though I knew that they couldn't attend a lot of, most of, you know, any school events, that they thought school was extremely important. But again, because of language and finances it made it practically impossible. (Interview, 6/11)

Anita's reflection on her parents' involvement in her schooling illuminates two salient factors from the discourse on parent involvement. An ecological view of family engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Comer & Haynes, 1991; Epstein & Dauber, 1991) exhorts us to remember that schools should recognize the myriad ways that families participate in their

children's education. Though the circumstances for many working families lives do not offer them the luxury of active presence at the school level, these families are no less committed to their children's education than families of higher socio-economic status. Higher SES families may have both flexible work schedules and sense of familiarity with and entitlement when it comes to connecting with their children's schools and these circumstances result in a more visible presence (Lareau, 2000; Lareau, 2003). For Anita's parents, the fact of not speaking the dominant language of the school presented an additional obstacle. Valdes (1996), in her research with Mexican immigrant families in the Southwest, documented that the families in her study demonstrated a great investment in their children's education but often perceived themselves as peripheral to the process. This led them to cede authority over their children's schooling to the "experts." Though Anita's parents may not have been an active presence in her school life, they were no less dedicated to supporting her education.

Perhaps in an effort to bridge her home and school experiences, Anita's parents enrolled her in a bilingual program when she entered school. Through this program, Anita remained with the same close-knit group of children from kindergarten through sixth grade. Anita recalled that her years in elementary school were filled with positive memories. She described a familial sense of intimacy gained from moving through school each year with same cohort of bilingual students. Additionally she recalled the sense of accomplishment and academic success, citing the Honor Roll buttons that she frequently received that her mother proudly saved. Reflecting on the impact of the bilingual program in retrospect, however, Anita commented, "Now I look back and I feel like I was segregated" (Interview transcript). Thinking about the model of her bilingual program in retrospect, Anita surmised that it would have been called a transitional bilingual program, where the goal was to move toward acquisition of English. However, Anita's memories

of elementary school was that over the course of those years most instruction was in Spanish, explaining,

It was mostly Spanish classes, and maybe one or two periods in English. And, yeah, the group felt like a family. Cause it was the same kids. In fact I didn't know back then, but now as an adult, that it's called tracking now. But as a kid it was fun to be with the same kids every year. (Interview transcript)

Though as an adult Anita interpreted the structure of bilingual programs of her childhood with some criticism, she repeatedly cited the family-like atmosphere her program achieved, explaining, “We were very close. We grew up brothers and sisters” (Interview transcript). In contrast, she described that in her experiences in subsequent educational settings she lacked that sense of comfort and camaraderie.

Interestingly, though Anita was enrolled in a program where both her teachers and her classmates shared her primary language, Anita recalled that, especially in her early years, she spoke very little at school. When reconnecting with her sixth grade teacher many years later she was surprised to find that he remembered her, perhaps because she had always felt invisible. In their first communication in adulthood,

He said, “Yeah, I remember you. You never spoke.” And I look back again and I was the quiet child. I didn't— Like I knew the answer but I was terrified to speak. I was probably what people call now a selective mute. I was just terrified. So scared to raise my hand or say anything. (Interview transcript)

Though Anita's teacher remembered her as remarkably silent, she was never given a diagnosis or label to corroborate her self-diagnosis as a “selective mute.” Yet, when asked identify a low point in her life Anita specifically chose to share a story that illustrated this sense of herself. She

recounted,

I remember sitting in the classroom and the teacher called on me, and I just froze. I started crying, just hysterical sobbing and... I remember I was so, so, so terrified. And I think the teacher was shocked because he didn't realize what he had done. But I remember that it felt so, so, so horrible to be called on. And I just remember that intense, horrible feeling. Just of being terrified and crying and crying and crying (*pause*). And I bet he never called on me again (*laughing slightly*). (Interview transcript)

Anita's sense of terror was still palpable as she recalled this story several decades later, and her use of repeated words (e.g. "so, so, so") in recalling the day underscored the power of this experience.

Despite her sense of overwhelming fear at participating verbally at school, Anita shared that from a very young age she began to imagine what it would be like to be a teacher when she grew up. When playmates would come over she would insist on playing school, getting out chalk and a small board and playing the role of teacher. She cited, Ms. Jimenez, her fifth grade teacher as a particular source of inspiration, recalling, "It was just something about her that inspired me. Like, 'If she can— Wow. If she can...' Here's a young, Hispanic teacher. And something clicked. Like, 'Oh, maybe I can do that too'" (Interview transcript). Anita seemed to have been particularly inspired in her aspiration to become a teacher by the fact that she and Ms. Jimenez had a shared ethnicity.

Anita's bilingual elementary program fed into a local, bilingual middle school program. However, when the time came to enroll in high school, Anita was proactive in selecting her next school. She explained,

In thinking about high school I remember I was really concerned about getting into a

good high school. My parents were not really aware. They just thought, “Oh, you just go to your neighborhood high school.” Which in my case was Thomas Jefferson, which was across the street from my building. And I told my mother, “No. I can’t go there. It’s a terrible school.” And they didn’t really understand what I meant. They were like, “But you don’t have to take a bus or the trains. It’s just right there. You’ll be safe.” And I was like, “No. I won’t be safe.” (Interview transcript)

Though she had described herself as being not very assertive when recalling her experiences in elementary and middle school, Anita took charge in researching better high school options for herself. She completed the application and interview process without her parents’ assistance. Contemporary critics of the fallacy of the system of school choice have noted that such “choice” is often only available to families of higher socio-economic status with the experience and entitlement necessary to navigate this complicated process on behalf of their children (Murrow, 2012). Despite her earlier shyness, however, Anita showed remarkable agency in seeking out a better high school option for herself. Though Anita had little interest in medicine she enrolled in a medical training program at Clara Barton High School across the street from the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, because she believed that the school would be safer and offer her a better education than her local high school. Anita’s years at Clara Barton also represented her first experience in a monolingual, English only program. Though she missed the relative intimacy of the small bilingual cohort of her earlier school years, Anita’s recollections of high school were generally happy ones. She shared warm memories of going with to play jacks with classmates at the Botanic Garden during breaks from class. After the first two years at Clara Barton, Anita realized that she lacked interest in and aptitude for the science classes required by the medical training program. She met with the guidance counselor and told them of her desire to become a

teacher. Though the school had no classes focused on education they did offer training for students interested in social work, so Anita switched to that track which offered coursework that more closely matched her interests.

Anita looked forward to continuing on to college in New York City, but upon her graduation from high school her parents announced their intention to move back to Puerto Rico. Anita described being devastated by this news, but at seventeen years of age her loyalty to her parents obligated to live with their decision. She moved with them and enrolled in the Inter-American University of Aguadilla, which she attended for one year. Despite her initial reservations about leaving New York, Anita recalled this year in Puerto Rico as a wonderful experience. However, in the late 1980's Puerto Rico's economy was struggling. With few job opportunities to support her through school, Anita returned to New York at age eighteen. There she lived with a friend and enrolled at City College where she studied bilingual education. Citing connections of language and culture, Anita described the bilingual program at CCNY as a return to the feeling of comfort and familiarity she had experienced in her bilingual program in elementary school. At CCNY Anita met one of her closest friends in adulthood, a woman who would later join her as a teacher at Cedar. Additionally, it was through her CCNY coursework that she was introduced for the first time to a progressive model of education. Anita was placed in Daniela's (one of the other five participating teachers in this study) class at River East for one week of fieldwork observations. Anita and Daniela made a strong impression on each other and this brief encounter led to her being hired as an assistant in Daniela's class the first year that Cedar opened.

Anita's first years in the classroom were eye opening. She felt mentored by Daniela as she absorbed a new model of teaching and learning. When it came time to enroll in a Masters

program, Anita planned to return to CCNY, but Cedar's principal encouraged her to apply to a program at Bank Street College. Recalling this exchange, Anita explained,

I thought, "What is that? What are you talking about? I don't know that school." But I started investigating. And I checked it out. And I realized, "I can't afford this school." It was really expensive.... But the principal kept encouraging me, "Try. Try again. Apply for a scholarship." And I was really lucky to get a scholarship. And that helped me a lot. Because I knew if I wanted to stay in a progressive school I didn't want to go back and learn more about traditional methods. But it was a struggle going. That was one of the most difficult times for me, at Bank Street College... Because it was not just people from different cultures but different social backgrounds. There were many students who were rich, you know, who had a lot of money... Hearing stories- I felt like in every class we were sharing stories, and none of the stories were similar to mine and it felt so uncomfortable. Everyone talking about the private school they attended or the private schools they were working at. And every one they shared just seemed, you know, like something I would see on TV. But nothing I could relate to. (Interview transcript)

Anita's experiences at Bank Street identified some of the challenges for the field of progressive education. The successes of the small schools movement aside, historically the progressive approach has primarily been limited to schools that serve white children from families of high socioeconomic status. As a consequence teachers who work in progressive schools are most often former students of these schools, whose familiarity with this method attracts them to it as a teaching philosophy (Semel & Sadovnik, 1999). If alternative public schools wish to offer this method for a more diverse student body, both by race and ethnicity and class, it is also critical that progressive schools of education prioritize supporting a diverse body of future teachers.

Despite her commitment to the progressive philosophy, Anita described her despair at feeling a like outsider status at Bank Street. After another student of color left the program at Bank Street to return to CCNY, Anita contemplated leaving as well. Fortunately, Bank Street's intimate size and structure meant that she had a close relationship with her academic advisor, who convinced her to stay and complete her coursework. Recalling that exchange Anita explained,

Somehow she made me see that I'll learn a lot from my classmates and they'll also learn a lot from me.... Slowly I started letting go of that fear... And to feel comfortable with all those differences. And not to feel down or ashamed because my background was different from other students. And to just be proud and not feel like less of a person or something because the other people had a different lifestyle. And I just felt proud. I was like, "Wow. Look. You know. I didn't have all of those things that the other people has. And my parents didn't graduate from college. And my parents worked at a factory. And my parents didn't speak English. And we're all in the same place." (Interview transcript)

Though she framed her family and educational history in terms of its deficits, Anita did come to appreciate her successes despite these differences as a point of pride. Having observed Anita as a teacher, I would argue that Anita's experiences have developed her capacity as an empathetic and culturally sensitive educator, in ways that would surpass the capabilities of her Bank Street classmates. In Chapter 5, which explores the teachers' work with families, Anita's strength in this area will be highlighted.

Anita has spent her entire teaching life at the Cedar School. She has weathered a tumultuous history of changes in administration and developed strong and familial connections to her colleagues. Anita is quick to point out that her commitment to the school extends to having sent her own children to Cedar. As far as future plans, Anita would like eventually to pursue

some more advanced study, perhaps a second Masters degree or possibly doctoral work. For the time being, however, her recent divorce has left her to raise two young children primarily on her own, leaving little time to imagine taking on a new challenge. Judging from the warmth and affection with which the families in her classroom receive her, Anita's additional years as a classroom teacher will be deeply appreciated by the Cedar community.

DANIELA

It would not be fair to begin my version of Daniela's biography without the caveat that Daniela and I have had a long relationship that preceded my research. Though I would never describe Daniela as guarded when speaking to anyone, I am also very aware that had she been interviewed by another researcher for this project she might not have been quite as candid or as intimate. As I attempted the nearly impossible task of writing any of these teachers' lives, I did so with a profound sense of humility that was especially heightened when I approached the construction of my dear friend Daniela's life.

Daniela describes herself as bilingual and bicultural. Moving between New York City and Puerto Rico, she was always aware of having feet in two lands, two cultures, two languages. As Daniela narrated the story of her life she represented herself as always simultaneously a daughter and a mother, a teacher and a student. It is not possible to tell the story of Daniela's life without first telling the story of her family and particularly her mother. Daniela's maternal grandfather was the second postal worker on the island of Puerto Rico. His status as a federal worker brought good wages, benefits and high status. Daniela's mother Maria was one of twelve children. Maria was a devout Catholic and studious about her education with the intention of eventually becoming a doctor. A dutiful daughter throughout childhood, upon graduation from

high school she shocked her parents with the announcement that she was moving to New York City to live with her sister and begin college. Daniela described her aunt as a sort of second mother, always living close by whether they were living in New York or Puerto Rico, and providing respite from her mother's more pious ways of living. In Brooklyn Maria met Daniela's father. Though she initially resisted his ardent courtship she eventually became pregnant with Daniela. Maria's dreams of becoming a doctor ended with Daniela's arrival and brought scorn from her family in Puerto Rico who expressed their grave disappointment in her for setting her educational goals aside. When Maria brought Daniela home for the first time her father reportedly looked at the toddler and remarked dismissively, "'Oh, that's your diploma?'" (Interview transcript.) For the rest of her working life Maria was employed as a factory worker in Brooklyn. One of a number of stories in Daniela's repertoire is the story of her first day of kindergarten. Despite the fact that it would mean a day of lost wages, Maria took the day off from work to come to school with Daniela, only to be turned away at the door by the school's principal. He invoked a school policy that parents, even those of very young children, were not permitted to enter the building. This story was one of many in Daniela's repertoire that she shared in a variety of contexts. She offered this story both to illustrate her mother's commitment to supporting her education and, further, as an illustration of the ways that public schools have historically failed to engage properly with families.

Daniela's father was also raised in Puerto Rico and came to New York in adulthood. Daniela knew little about her father's family and background, but believed that he came from a wealthy family because was sent to a private school where he completed his education up to the eighth grade. When speaking of her father, Daniela's voice often held a sharp tinge of disdain. Though she was never specific in describing his abuse, she attributed his mistreatment of Maria

and herself as the source of her anger and distrust of men. Daniela described that her father as a man who lived and played hard, suffering three heart attacks by the age of thirty. Growing up, Daniela often wished that he would leave their lives forever and admitted that she actively contemplated ways to hasten his demise. By the time she was fourteen her wish had come true and her father was dead. Far from being a traumatic incident, Daniela described her father's death as the beginning of a new chapter of freedom and happiness for their family.

When asked to sketch an outline of her life in chapters, Daniela approached the task thoroughly and formally, going so far as to offer official titles to each chapter. Her story began, I think Chapter One is— My parents were both Puerto Rican immigrants and by the time I was born they were already not together. And they had me within the first year and a half of their marriage. So already, by the time I was born, my mom is raising me alone. Now they never got divorced. He came and went a lot. So, Chapter One: Single Mother, No Excuses. (Interview transcript)

In framing the first chapter of her life in the context of her mother's biography, Daniela grounded her identity in her mother's history. The importance of the mother daughter relationship Daniela's definition of her self would continue as a theme as she narrated the story of her life. Though Daniela had a sister as well, it was her mother who loomed large in stories as both a tangible and spiritual presence throughout her life and beyond it into death. Though she characterized herself as anti-religion, when Daniela spoke of her relationship with her mother she appeared to have a deeply spiritual side. Describing their ongoing relationship even after Maria's death, Daniela explained "My mother? She's god. She is. She does things. Every, every time— I hear her. I feel her presence. I **feeeeeeel** her." (Interview transcript) Daniela rejected the Catholic upbringing her mother insisted on because she blamed Catholicism for institutionalizing

the oppression of women, particularly in the Latino community. Daniela's irreverence was clear when recalling the religious debates she used to have with her mother,

I used to have this argument. She was a very religious woman. And I was, as a kid. And then I went, "Wait. Women can't what? Fuck you! Yeah? Fuck you twice. I don't care who you fuckin' call yourself." And my mother's like, "Would you just--?" 'No! What the hell is that shit?" So, I left the church. I got married in the church and then I got the fuck out. And I did not baptize my child. And she'd say, "You just have to have faith." And I'd say, "Faith?!? What the fuck is that? No! Fuck faith. Fuck the, 'Oh we just have to...'" 'This is what the...'" Ay ay ay. 'You must resign yourself...'" Right? No!" Every fuckin' Latina woman in the planet. I'm like, "Fuck that shit. Come at me, I will knife you." Faith? So I'd say, "No. I don't have time for faith." I can't *wait*. I'm impatient. So I wrote three poems when she died at 59 of cancer in three months (*pause*). One says "We used to talk about faith and I'd say, 'I don't understand' and she'd say, 'That's right'" (*breaks out in deep cascading laughter*). (Interview transcript).

In addition to capturing Daniela's irreverence and indignant sense of humor, this story also represented a pattern in Daniela's storytelling. Many of Daniela's anecdotes were sprinkled with direct speech and at times managed to represent multiple views through the perspective of a seemingly omnipresent narrator. These interesting qualities of Daniela's storytelling style seemed to reveal something about Daniela's sense of herself. Through invoking the direct speech of the characters in the story in her life, Daniela's storytelling style produced an immediacy and a rich descriptiveness to the quality of her memories. It seemed less important to Daniela that the quotes she shared from other speakers were verbatim and more important that she vividly and viscerally transported the listener to that moment in her history. This quality of her stories, paired

with Daniela's tendency to play the role of omnipresent narrator, suggested that she felt she had a powerful role to play in directing the listener's experience of the story. Her orientation toward storytelling was consistent with the powerful character I have experienced Daniela to be in daily life. Daniela seems to conceive of herself as the person responsible for moving the story of our lives forward through her decisive action.

Growing up in the Brownsville/East New York section of Brooklyn in the 1960s Daniela attended public schools that were integrated with African American, Latino, and white, Jewish children. Though Daniela embraced her learning and was generally highly successful in school, she described being keenly aware of deep flaws and inequality in the system of public education. She detailed the ways that the system of tracking was used as a tool to enforce segregation within their diverse school community. While she generally enjoyed her own experiences in school, Daniela cited numerous examples of individual racism on the part of white teachers and institutional racism on the part of the school. Daniela observed that this oppression was compounded for Latino children whose language was treated as a deficit and a justification for the school to eschew any responsibility for their learning.

In identifying the second chapter of her life, Daniela skipped ahead a number of years. Though chapter one highlighted the circumstances of her birth, chapter two jumped forward to her adolescence. She titled this period,

Chapter Two is: Fourteen Years Old and Suddenly in My Homeland. My dad died when I was fourteen. By thirty-six he had heart illness. By forty-one he was dead. Did everything in excess. And my mom had no time. So she would be like, "Yeah, whatever. He does what he does. We do what we do." It was confusing. Because I would be like, "You're together. You're not together. Do I have to listen to him? Do I not have to listen to him?"

What's up with that?" So that was confusing, and I decided I'm never doing that. So when he finally died, which, I always say – may he rest in peace now – best thing he ever did for me. "Just go. Just go. You know? You're annoying. You're confusing. You're annoying. Just go. Cause that way our life would be better. She'll be happier anyway."

(pause)

She never remarried, you know, never decided to have any relationship. She instead, within a month of his death, moved us to Puerto Rico. Which was **great**. So now I'm fourteen, I'm in Puerto Rico... I'm in middle school... So that's it. Fourteen Years Old and Suddenly I'm in My Homeland. Fortunately for me, I was completely bilingual by the age of– Well, I was always bilingual. I was biliterate by the age of ten. My mother was insistent. So now I'm in Puerto Rico and in school where they speak, guess what? Spanish! So lucky for me I was biliterate and I didn't have to go back in grades or any of those terrible things. (Interview transcript)

As with the first chapter of Daniela's life, this chapter began with the details of the generation that preceded her. She also underscored the importance of her identification as bicultural and bilingual. In naming Puerto Rico as her homeland, though she had not yet lived there prior, Daniela staked her claim to be home in both places: New York and Puerto Rico.

Having established her intolerance for the type of relationship her parents had in the first two chapters, Daniela chose to identify the third chapter of her life as the experience of meeting her husband,

Chapter Three is: I Graduate From High School and I Meet My Husband. I graduate. I meet my life partner, at eighteen, no at seventeen. Ok. Chapter Three. And he's pretty much Chapter Three through whatever else. But nonetheless. All right. My life partner.

And our contract– We make a contract– He was a rebound relationship. And I said to him, “Here’s the deal: We’re partners. That’s how it’s gotta be.” Cause we’re in Puerto Rico and it’s the sixties, the late sixties. So the Sexual Revolution is starting. The Civil Rights Revolution– Movement, is starting. I’m in Puerto Rico. Six month delays on news and on movies and everything. But I’m watching everything on the news, because I’m really a New Yorker. So I’m saying, “If you can just– if you can handle being my partner, we can be together. If you have some sort of notion that you’re gonna tell me what to do, what to wear, and all of those things, this isn’t gonna work. So I’m gonna have to be clear.” I don’t say this in terms of, “Then I’m gonna have to kill you.” But in my head I was saying, “Or I’d have to kill you.” Because I had all this aggression and anger (*pause*) about my dad. About the way he treated my mom. Cause she didn’t deserve that. So. (*pause*) So he was like, “I could **only** be your partner.” (Interview transcript)

Despite Daniela’s well-founded distrust of heterosexual relationships, she characterized her relationship with her husband Stephen as a deeply loving partnership. When Daniela met Stephen she described being absolutely intrigued by the way his mind worked. He was a brilliant and successful student but was also actively dealing marijuana and had already served several stints in jail. Given these circumstances, Stephen seemed to trigger a maternal impulse in her, as she explained, “Because he just needed more love and more supervision, and I’m all about that” (Interview transcript). Her impulse to care-take for a man saddled with such challenges alarmed Maria, who told her,

“You don’t know what you’re doing. You don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t know what you’re getting into.” And I was like, “I love him. Period. End of story. And either you’re with me or you’re not.” And she said, “I’m with you. Of course I’m

with you. I'm with you." And about twenty minutes later came Eva, my daughter. So Chapter Four is And Now We're a Family. And he said, "I'm not really good enough for you right now. I'm not in a good place. And you're clearly a good person so I've gotta tell you that. I'm gonna fix some stuff and if you're still interested..." And I said, "Yeah, here's the problem. You don't get to make that choice for me. 'Member?" And that's when I knew I loved him. Because how selfless an act is that? To say, "I'm worried I'm gonna hurt you." I was like, "No, you're not gonna hurt me, I'm gonna hurt you." And we've been partners ever since. (Interview transcript)

In narrating her life, Daniela was forceful in framing the analysis of her life's choices. Characterizing Stephen as selfless and herself as the potential perpetrator of violence, Daniela offered a twist on the typical narrative of heterosexual domestic violence. In flipping the narrative in this way, Daniela simultaneously challenged the typical roles for men and women in the dynamic of domestic violence at the same time that she preserved the presence of violence in heterosexual relationships. In closing this description with the phrase, "And we've been partners ever since." Daniela seemed to suggest that, through the power in her action of flipping this narrative, both she and Stephen were able to break out of a cycle of oppressive gender roles. As a result they have experienced a life long partnership that today, after more than forty years of marriage, is full of passion, support, and mutual admiration. For his part, Stephen broke free of the grim cycle of recidivism, completed college and advanced graduate work, and holds a high level position in the financial industry. Daniela noted, "I could not have done this job, this many years and had the life I've lived if he hadn't been making what he makes" (Interview transcript). It seems that for both Daniela and Stephen, their relationship has supported each other to be their best selves.

In narrating the first two decades of her life, Daniela included a number of details and asides. However, when she introduced an outline of the last forty years of her life she did so with uncharacteristic brevity,

So Chapter Five is, The Most Amazing Journey: A Career, A Marriage, Two Children (One of Each Kind). I'll stop it there. As my mom would say, "You've got one of each kind? Stop it there. One for each hand. You can do that." And we did. And life is good... Chapter Six: Schizophrenia: And Now What?... Chapter Seven: We Move Forward. And Chapter Eight is: The Five Year Plan Towards Grandmother Life.

In our subsequent discussions, Daniela filled out the details of those four later chapters. However, introducing her adult years, which included the painful experience of her daughter's diagnosis with schizophrenia, seemed to be a difficult story to begin to tell.

As with most life stories, the threads of Daniela's personal and professional life were intertwined. Daniela identified the period surrounding Eva's birth a high point of her life, in part because she experienced motherhood as representing the beginning of her life as a teacher. During this time Daniela and Stephen were completing their undergraduate coursework at the University of Puerto Rico. The couple lived at home with Maria who insisted that if they would not yet marry at least Daniela must finish college. Stephen had won a scholarship, so he worked part time to pay for Daniela's tuition. Daniela described their life at this time as idyllic. Though she had not yet decided on a major, the questions that arose during her pregnancy piqued her interest in the study of education. She recalled walking across campus one day,

And as I'm walking I start thinking about this baby that's tiny, tiny inside me and I wonder, I remember wondering – cause I'm nineteen, I'm twenty – "How do people learn stuff? How does that work?" And a part of that question had to do with language,

specifically. I guess ‘cause I was so immersed in language and stories but also bilingual. “How do people learn two languages? How does language come in your head? How does that **work**?” And as soon as I asked myself the question, the answers began to come.... And I didn’t know what I was gonna do. And then I *knew* what I was gonna do. Being a mom, at that age, meant I have to find everything I can find out about how learning happens, so I can be the best mom for this baby. Like this baby’s gonna be my research project. And now I know what I wanna do. (Interview transcript)

Daniela approached her pregnancy with a strong sense of purpose. Once Eva was born, Maria cared for the baby while the young couple worked and attended classes. At home Daniela’s “research project” was in full swing, and she exhaustively documented every aspect of Eva’s young life and learning. Fuelled by the questions that Eva’s learning prompted, Daniela began to explore alternative models of education including the radically progressive model of Summerhill as well as Puerto Rico’s experiments in two-way bilingual education programs.

Upon graduation from the University of Puerto Rico, Stephen was offered another scholarship to attend graduate school in Albany, NY. The young family relocated there, and both Daniela and Stephen completed additional coursework that would prepare them for their careers. Stephen’s study of economics and history would eventually lead to a position at J.P. Morgan, where he ascended the corporate ladder. Daniela’s studies in bilingual education led her to write a grant to develop a bilingual program for incarcerated youths. Daniela described this chapter of her work history with great pride and defiance, detailing the ways in which she worked to develop a well-respected program that was the first of its kind. Stephen’s career eventually led them to New York City, where Daniela became pregnant with their second child, a boy who they named Stevie. Daniela spared few details in narrating the joys and challenges in their life

together. Her indignation at injustice and her actions to counter oppression were recurring themes in the chapters of her life. Throughout these stories however, Daniela's irreverence sense of humor were always on display and with her stories frequently punctuated by her deep throaty laughter.

Despite her early coursework in education, Daniela's formal teaching career did not begin until many years after her graduation. While they lived in Albany, Daniela was very involved in the parent cooperative preschool that Eva attended. When they arrived in New York Daniela enrolled Eva in several different schools, first public then private, in an effort to find a school that she felt met Eva's needs. Through her research Daniela discovered the network of progressive public schools that were being established in New York City at the time. She enrolled Eva in River East, and when Stevie was of school age she enrolled him in kindergarten at Central Park East. At CPE Daniela informally apprenticed herself to Stevie's kindergarten teacher and spent the next couple of years volunteering. Because she held a B.A. in Education, she was able to assist in a variety of capacities at the school. When an opening came up at River East, Daniela was hired as a classroom teacher there. Four years later, she left the school to be a founding teacher at the Cedar School.

Much of Daniela's teaching history is intertwined with Cedar's history and can be found in Chapter 3. One parallel between Daniela's telling of her personal and professional histories was her tendency to place herself in the context of a larger lineage. When Daniela told the story of her personal history, she contextualized it in terms of her family history, going back several generations. When Daniela described her work as a teacher she invoked a number of figures in order to locate herself in relationship to the family tree of contemporary progressive education. When describing her early years as a teacher she reproduced, seemingly verbatim, full length

dialogues between herself and those that had mentored her along the way, such as Lillian Weber of the Workshop Center at City College. When describing her work at Cedar, she represented herself as a humble leader and mentor within the community. Daniela's role now as a venerable old-timer was evident in the mothering tone she took when speaking to the other Cedar teachers, as well as in how the other teachers spoke of her. That said, while many recognized her as a central figure in the history of the school, they have not always agreed with her passionate and lengthy assessment of circumstances related to the school, particularly her evaluation of various school leaders.

Concurrent with her teaching life at Cedar, Daniela's personal history continued to be rich and complicated. The low point of her life was her daughter Eva's diagnosis with schizophrenia. She narrated the experience of intervening to address Eva's "psychotic break" with urgency, punctuating the story with reproduction the direct speech of the myriad actors in the unfolding drama, including Eva, Stevie, Stephen, Eva's boyfriend, police officers, and doctors. Throughout the incident she characterized herself as taking a decisive role in the action. Daniela recalled her realization,

And I said, "My daughter's schizophrenic." I didn't even know what that meant. But it's like the worst thing anybody could be. And I said to myself, "My daughter's schizophrenic." And with that thought came, *(long pause)* "Okay." Now my mother had already died many years before, but my mother was there *(pause)*. It was like the only way I could get through that moment was knowing that my mother's spirit was, at that moment, with us.

In reflecting on this difficult episode, Daniela returned to two themes that ran throughout her life history. The first was of her identity as a resolute decider, taking the reins over the situation and

moving forward with authority. By invoking again the posthumous presence of her mother, Daniela did not claim a solitary autonomy in these acts of strength, instead aligning her capacities as a mother with the support she gathered from her ongoing connection with Maria.

Daniela's retirement from the NYC public school system is a suitable bookend to this wholly incomplete telling of Daniela's life. In the spring of 2011, Daniela announced that after twenty-two years as a public school teacher she would be leaving the classroom. Daniela is vocal and highly critical of the state of public education today. She speaks out frequently and authoritatively against the ways that children's opportunities for learning are being impinged upon by a narrowing of curriculum brought about in the current climate. She is also particularly fierce in her condemnation of the ways in which teachers and their work have been under attack during this chapter in educational history. She cited these circumstances as contributing to her decision to leave the classroom. However, as a founding mother of the Cedar School, she also took pains to emphasize that she would not have left the school at this time unless she had faith that, under Ava's leadership, the school was in good hands. Daniela's retirement and Ginger's ascendancy at Cedar seemed to mark the beginning of an interesting new chapter in the history of both Cedar and the New York public school system. After spending a restorative and reflective year out of the classroom, Daniela learned with delight of the anticipated arrival of her next "research project": her first grandchild, due in February 2013.

ESTELLE

Estelle's classroom is a hive of activity. The room houses a variety of class pets, growing plants, and everywhere there is evidence of student projects in various stages of completion. Estelle's 2nd and 3rd grade students work with a surprising level of autonomy and maturity. While

they may check in with her periodically about their work, students under Estelle's guidance convey a great sense of ownership over their learning. Walking through the neighborhood with her after school requires multiple spontaneous stops to exchange warm greetings with current and former students as well as their families. The intimacy, thoughtfulness and care of Estelle's exchanges with Cedar children and their parents makes it clear that for many, Estelle is not just a teacher, she is part of the family.

Estelle is an African American woman in her mid 40s. She was born and bred in New York City and attended public schools through high school. She left the area for four years to attend a highly regarded liberal arts college in New England. Upon graduation Estelle returned to the city and has lived and worked there since. Though she was aware that her family struggled with financial and other challenges, Estelle described her upbringing with a sense of contentment and gratitude, explaining, "I never had a sense of lack. Or a sense of, like, something was missing. I don't remember feeling that way" (Interview transcript). Raised by her mother and step-father, Estelle lived in apartments in the Bronx and East Harlem, and made frequent visits to her grandmother's house in the Bronx. Estelle described being close to her immediate family, especially her mother and her brother, and felt especially supported by her mother and stepfather in her education.

When asked to provide an outline of the chapters of her life, Estelle focused the framing of her identity first as a student and later a teacher. Estelle recalled that she did not begin school with a strong sense of herself as a learner, but that by the middle of elementary school she recognized herself as "a pursuer of academic excellence" (Interview transcript). Estelle recalled that school involved long hours of studying, though she did not recount this detail to portray school as a burden instead conveying a sense pride and purpose. For high school Estelle tested

into one of New York's specialized high schools, where she continued to approach her education with great studiousness and dedication. Her accomplishments in high school led to Estelle's admission to a highly regarded liberal arts college. The location of her university in New England, allowed Estelle to enjoy just the right balance of independence she sought in early adulthood. Becoming a teacher Estelle worked first for several years at another public school before arriving at Cedar. Estelle described this chapter in her life as the time,

...When I was able to identify what it means to have a career. What it means to have a mission or a purpose in life. To develop a sense of camaraderie through the people there. And a redefinition of friendship. And also the complexities of camaraderie. That sometimes it means agreeing to disagree.... (Interview transcript)

The final chapter Estelle identified in her life history was her decision to go back to graduate school. Estelle is currently pursuing a doctorate in education and describes this as a time of return but also moving forward. Narrating a sketch of this chapter of her life Estelle described this period as a time of "reenvision[ing] my mission" and "rediscovering my academic self". Throughout our interviews I had a strong sense of Estelle's capacity for intellectually grounded reflection. Estelle seems to crave the kind of scholarly community that allows her to engage in such work. When she arrived at Cedar, Estelle felt fed by the cerebral work the community of teachers engaged in there. She admitted resignedly that now she feels the need to seek out that conversation elsewhere.

While many of the teachers interviewed chose to share particularly dramatic anecdotes for the "critical incidents" section of the life history interview, Estelle's stories were often remarkable for their ordinariness. This is not in any way to diminish the value of the stories. This observation only serves to highlight that Estelle is a person who deeply values and reflects on the

possibilities contained in the most quotidian moments. Additionally, while several of the other teachers were quick to identify critical incident stories, Estelle always asked for additional time to select a story to share. She often asked me to repeat the directions or asked clarifying follow up questions to be sure she had the sense of the meaning of my question. Estelle seems to be a person who takes great care with story.

When I asked Estelle to share a high point of her life, she thought a few moments and then launched into a description of a single moment in the school yard during her third grade. In telling the story these many years later, Estelle began by narrating the memory in the present tense. Estelle seemed to be transported to that moment in time, beginning, “The time is after lunch. It's our recess break. The place is our school yard.” She continued,

The characters are my best friend Angela and two other friends who were, I guess you could say, part of our Girls' Crew. And we had developed this habit of using our imaginations to reenact television shows that we had watched. But I personally think ours' were way more creative than some of the stuff I see on the playground today. So in this particular instance it was *The Land of the Lost*, which at that time was my favorite show. And what I remember quite vividly was— Ooh! Just, that there is no one else, besides the four of us, particularly me and my best friend. There was no one else that existed in the playground. So I remember distinctly that obviously there was noise. There were a lot of kids running around. But they were completely blocked out. And I could see the *Tyrannosaurus Rex* coming to, like— I could see it from the corner of the yard.... And I could see it running towards us. And I could see it. And I remember grabbing my best friend's hand. And we would run. And we would scream. And we were totally just trying to dodge this horrible dinosaur that I could see as clear as day. It was incredibly fun. And

though I felt terrified, because I was with her I felt extremely protected. Extremely, you know, safe. So it was fun, even though it was terrifying fun, and we were scaring ourselves. And I remember thinking that this was— Well, at that time, the best thing that could ever happen. And I remember that there was this tremendous sense of joy in the play, in the creativity of it all. Just in the, in the way that I could see that dinosaur and all of its detail. (Interview transcript)

Given that Estelle is herself a third grade teacher, it is not surprising that she has spent some time recalling her experiences of that age. However, I was struck again by the fact that Estelle chose to tell the story of this particular moment in her life history. There were likely thousands of such experiences of play throughout Estelle's childhood. She might also have chosen to describe one of the many academic and career accomplishments she has achieved. Instead Estelle focused on a moment that exemplified values that have been consistent and clear throughout her narrative of her life. The moment she described was filled with camaraderie, friendship, and the sheer joy to be found in play and the exercise of one's imagination. The threads that ran through this story also describe the sense one has as a visitor in Estelle's classroom. When asked to reflect on what this story reflects about her life now, Estelle explained that as an educator she continually strives to create such opportunities for her students, remarking,

I think that's the space that I try to allow my students. That's the room I try to give my students. I don't ever want it to be that it's my vision or my creativity that's, you know, better or surpassing theirs. I want them to have possibilities in their own creation. I also remember, honestly speaking, that story is one of many happy memories from school. And I still have happy memories about school, so, you know, I think that's another piece. It's not a place that I see as a dudgeon or drudgery, and I hate going to. It's a place that I

feel, you know, embodies a lot of joy. And there's a safety, a safeness... And I feel safe now and I want my students to feel safe. (Interview transcript)

Though Estelle shared a low point in her life's history she subsequently asked that I remove this story from the transcript of our interviews, because she was concerned with how this story might reflect on her family members. While the story was a painful personal memory, it did not strike me as exceptionally dramatic or overly critical of her family. Her request to redact this data indicated to me once again Estelle's sense of care and concern for those close to her.

In describing a turning point in her life Estelle recalled a moment from the early days of her practice of Buddhism, which she came to as an adult. She pursues her spiritual growth through a Japanese Buddhist school that focuses on developing a meditation practice. After a period of soul searching and trying out various religions, Estelle discovered Buddhism in her thirties. At the end of her first year of meditation practice, Estelle attended a conference designed particularly for African American Buddhists. Though Estelle characterized her entire discovery of her Buddhist practice as life changing, she described a catalyzing moment of enlightenment during her meditation at that conference. Estelle identified a personal transformation as a result of this spiritual practice, recognizing in herself immediately afterward that,

Something has definitely changed. And I can honestly say that before— It's almost that year, you know? Prior to that and then after that. Very different person. You know? I definitely seek to understand people's motives. But not from a judgmental way. But a, “Why might they be doing this?” You know? More in a compassionate way. And I'm so much less assuming and so much more forgiving and so much more patient and understanding. With everyone. (*slight laugh*) You know, at work, in my personal life. I mean, I just never saw myself as a patient person and my patience just escalated after

that. So my way of being with others in the world, I felt, completely changed as a result of that. And it helped in other areas in my life that I never would have imagined. And it also made me (*pause*) I guess in a way it made me a true seeker. So instead of, looking at a situation and being— Just a case in point with our current principal. When someone has a tendency to go, “She's doing this for this reason.” My tendency is to go, “No. Wait. Let's wait and see. Let me gather some more data.” But I was, in my twenties, one who was, you know, (*snapping*) quick to judge. You know? “They're just— She or he is doing that because they don't like me.” Or, or make it all about me. So there's also just, like, not taking things as personal. Because, you know, it's not. They're not reacting to who I am. They're reacting to who they are. (Interview transcript)

Estelle attributed her increased capacity to suspend judgment to the experience of becoming enlightened through Buddhism. However, her decision to seek out such a spiritual practice also indicated an inclination within herself toward this orientation to the world.

Though Estelle described this capacity for empathy as a new characteristic that came after her introduction to Buddhism, her highly attuned connections to the feelings and experiences of others in her life appeared to be in place before then. When asked to recall her earliest memory, Estelle described an incident when a pair of new puppies that she and her brother had just been given were stolen from the porch of her grandmother's home. Being only three or four, Estelle felt a great sadness at losing the dogs. Yet she also recalled, “I remember feeling helplessness for the adults, cause I— They were pained as well. But they— there was nothing they could do” (Interview transcript). Few three to four year olds display such sensitivity to the emotional experiences of others. It is possible that Estelle has applied this insight retroactively to this experience, yet in describing the story in adulthood her focus seemed to be a

part of the emotional color of the experience. In sharing the details of this incident, Estelle also underscored that she came of age in the New York in the 1970s. Given these circumstances, she had to inure herself to the challenges of living in a neighborhood where safety was a concern, quipping, “But I did mention it was the Bronx, right?” (Interview transcript) Though Estelle mentioned several times throughout the interview that her family struggled financially and otherwise, she nonetheless consistently characterized her childhood as full of joy.

When asked to share stories from childhood and adolescence, Estelle shared stories that exemplified the warmth and happiness of her memories. Both were brief and ordinary moments of conviviality and camaraderie. The first was a sleepover with her best girlfriend from school, and the second was a trip to the movies with an older female cousin. In narrating both stories, Estelle seemed to be transported back to that moment in time, indicated again by her use of the present tense, and punctuated by reflective comments throughout. Describing the sleepover she narrated,

...It's night time, and the lights in her bedroom are off. And it's the city so there's all this light, playing with light and shadow. So we're sitting together, you know, curled up in her bed, and we're freaking each other out. Because basically we're pointing and saying, you know, “That's a ghost.” or, you know, “That's a monster!” And, you know, she'd see something and we'd jump under the covers. And, I'd see something else and we'd jump under the covers. And it was just awesome. It was significant, honestly speaking, one because it was one of the best times I had ever had with a friend in elementary school. The other instance [on the playground] I felt was more about imagination and creativity. This was about sharing a special experience with someone that was really important. I realized how much she meant to me. You know? That day. It was nice to be invited into

her home. And to be so— You know? I felt like part of the— Listen. I was taught the Puerto Rican way of dunking the toast. And I was given coffee. I don't get coffee in my house.

You know what I mean? I felt really grown up and very special. (Interview transcript)

While I had asked all of the teachers to reflect on how each incident shaped who they are now, Estelle was the most attentive to this direction in my interview protocol to end each story with some reflection. She closed this recollection with her thoughts on what each story told about her,

...It's really important to me that I have people in my life that I can have fun with, that I can share special moments with. It's important to me that there are people in my life that I feel close to, in a very intimate way. I guess it's also important for people that I feel close to know what scares me. You know? And that they're okay with that. (Interview transcript)

In recalling an important adolescent scene, Estelle again recounted an experience that was marked by a sense of intimacy and trust. She recalled spending an afternoon going to see a movie with her slightly older cousin. Though the experience was brief, the day was Estelle identified the experience as the moment of a catalyzing shift in her thinking about herself. She explained,

...I remember saying that I was a kid. And she was like, "No, you're not." She said, "You're a young woman." Like she clarified that for me. And we had a conversation about Prince that was not, like, G-Rated. You know what I mean? Like, she told me about how much she liked him. And I talked about, you know, why I liked him. And it was just great. It felt very, very appropriate for that age, and that time in my life. I think it was also what I needed. 'Cause fourteen is weird. It was a really tough time. It was a tough year. I remember emotionally, just feeling a lot of different things around my body and

my self and my person. I really needed this day with her. You know? It was really great for healing. For kind of finding myself. 'Cause she helped me see myself in a different light. At fourteen I wasn't necessarily accepting of adulthood or even growing up.

(Interview transcript)

Continuing, Estelle explained that this experience made her aware of the importance of having extended family and other close female friendships to provide the kind of nurturance she needed. While Estelle gathered much support and love at home, it was also important to her to have other sources of support as she grew in the world. Estelle's appreciation of the capacity for people outside of a child's immediate family to support their growth may connect to the role she envisions for herself as a teacher.

In her last recollection from adulthood, Estelle seemed to shift from the role of nurtured to nurturer. In this Estelle shared an experience of caring both physically and emotionally for a friend who had suffered a challenging episode related to her mental health. Reflecting on the experience now Estelle commented,

I realized what kind of a friend I could be. You know? And sometimes it's those tough experiences that you have to go through with people that you think you know really well that actually show who you really are. And I, honestly speaking, I didn't know I had it in me. I really didn't. (Interview transcript)

One of many values that Estelle seems to have taken from her life's experiences is her sense of the intimate role that important friends and family members can play in a person's life, both in nurturing their growth and in fostering their sense of joy in the world. Through her teaching, Estelle seems committed to passing on the gift of the support she has received to her students. While all teachers are aware of the familial role they play in the lives of their students, Estelle

seems keenly aware of the responsibility of her position. She brings to this work both a heightened sensitivity about people and a delight in fostering children's growth and learning that are palpable for visitors to her classroom.

GINGER

The youngest and newest teacher to participate in this study was Ginger. With an undergraduate degree in psychology, Ginger is completing her Masters in Special Education at Hunter College, paid for through the highly competitive New York City Teaching Fellows program. A white woman her early twenties, Ginger's first year in the classroom was 2010/11. During her first year in the classroom, Ginger appeared to impress Cedar's principal to the degree that in the 2011/12 school year was asked take on several new roles at the school. These positions came with additional responsibilities and resulted in her leaving her role as classroom teacher. Primarily, Ginger was named as the Coordinator for Special Education Services for the school. In this role she provides pull-out support services for students in all grades who have Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs). Additionally, because Ginger has a personal background and training in performing arts, she was asked to become the school's music teacher, though officially doing any work outside of special education specifically could be seen to violate the requirements of her position through the Teaching Fellows program. Finally, upon the news of Daniela's retirement, the principal asked Ginger to take over Daniela's role as emcee of the school's Weekly Gathering. Despite her youth and limited experience as a classroom teacher, Ginger's rapid ascent into roles of increased responsibility suggests that, in the eyes of the current principal, Ginger represents the future face of Cedar.

Ginger described herself as having been raised in “the straight-up, middle of nowhere” (Interview transcript) on thirty-two acres in rural New England. Ginger’s mother was a New England native who completed an advanced degree in early childhood education and has held several different high status positions in the field. Ginger described her father as, “a displaced Jew from Long Island, who ran away from law school and hid out in New England and never left” (Interview transcript). Her father holds a job as the state-wide Educational Coordinator for a federal program. Ginger explained that throughout her childhood both parents communicated in a variety of ways that education was a high priority for both Ginger and her brother.

In describing her own educational history, Ginger explained that on paper, she would have been perceived as highly successful; receiving excellent grades and holding leadership roles in numerous extra curricular activities. In retrospect, however, Ginger described these accomplishments as empty, characterizing them as activities she drove herself to participate in only to improve her chances of getting into a top tier college. A recurring theme throughout Ginger’s narrative of her life was the desire to escape the trap of her hometown social structure. She explained, “I just got really into knowing that I had to get into college. And I started getting pretty OCD about getting into college and making sure I did everything I was supposed to do. So I was in every club, every organization” (Interview transcript). Ginger’s desire to surpass her classmates seemed rooted in a resentment of the social pecking order of her hometown, which she described being very entrenched and “legacy” oriented. To illustrate this dynamic, Ginger cited her frustration at never being recognized for her contributions to local sports teams, always feeling passed over for other players whose families had a longer history in the town. Ginger characterized the predominant social group in her hometown as socially and politically conservative. Elaborating on the demographics of her town, Ginger explained,

There's this interesting dichotomy between the families who have been there forever and the people who come from, let's say, New York and are professionals and who moved to live on land. As opposed to people who have lived there forever, because they don't want to go anywhere else, and they've never been anywhere else. (Interview transcript)

Here and elsewhere as she narrated her biography, Ginger expressed a marked disdain with what she perceived to be the close-minded perspective of many in her hometown.

Upon graduation from high school, Ginger was offered a leadership scholarship that included \$20,000 in tuition to attend Mt. Holyoke College. Though to an outside observer this award might have represented the culmination of Ginger's campaign for academic success, when asked to identify the low point in her life Ginger immediately cited her first night at Mt. Holyoke as the most difficult time she could recall. In her words,

It was like waking up in a nightmare where you realize that you made the wrong choice. You know? And all I could think of, was, "What did I do? Was the money really worth it? Was this school really worth it?" Because I was sitting there and I realized that I was in the middle of nowhere, Western Mass. And I didn't know anyone. Not a single person. And looking around, you know, very judgmentally, I didn't want to know anyone. I really had no desire to make friends with any of those girls. Cause I didn't really like girls. And it sort of hit me again that I had, like, three female friends, so why was I at an all girls school? (Interview transcript)

Given her feelings about her hometown, it is perhaps not surprising that Ginger felt isolated going to school in a relatively rural environment. Considering her choice to eventually work in childhood education, a field primarily dominated by women, Ginger's characterization of herself as someone who does not enjoy the company of women seemed interesting.

When asked to describe a turning point in her life's history, Ginger cited the process by which she eventually decided to leave Mt. Holyoke. Though she detailed her misery at feeling trapped at Mt. Holyoke, she stayed on for a full year before finally allowing herself to leave. Ginger attributed this delay in part to her hesitation to return home to attend her local state school, explaining,

It felt like settling. It felt like I was back, you know, running home. That I was failing.

That I was going to a less prestigious school. And all the people that went there from my high school. And I thought I was better than them. (Interview transcript)

Ginger's sense of failure was mitigated when she was admitted to the Honors College, a distinction that gave her a sense of accomplishment because, as she described,

None of the other people who were in my high school were in there. So as snobby as that is, I still took pride in the fact that I was better than people from my hometown. Which I struggled for years about, you know. Not understanding them and feeling left out kind of, 'cause I wasn't a [local] legacy. Like, you know, my parents didn't play softball and their parents did. (Interview transcript)

Throughout the process of narrating her life history, Ginger was remarkably transparent and reflective about her preoccupation with status and her desire to surpass her classmates. She contextualized this concern as being rooted in her family's values around education and social status. Ginger explained the difficulty she faced in explaining her transfer to her grandmother who, "wanted to wear a Mt Holyoke sweatshirt down by the pool, because another woman in her building had a Smith sweatshirt. And it was kinda like, 'Well Grandma, too bad. It's more than a sweatshirt. It's my life'" (Interview transcript). Ginger's desire to break free of her hometown

also seemed rooted in her resentment at feeling undervalued and constrained by the rigid social hierarchy there.

Ginger's capacity for self-reflection about her attention to social status was evident when I asked her to share an important scene from childhood. For this piece of her biography, Ginger selected an incident when she recognized that her conceit had damaging consequences. In introducing the story, Ginger explained that she shared this anecdote with her students to offer herself as an object lesson in the problems of succumbing to peer pressure. Ginger recalled a day in fifth grade when class assignments at her small school were posted on the bulletin board. When the assignments were released, Ginger stood in front of the lists reading the names aloud and categorizing the students into groups as "cool" or "uncool." One of the girls that Ginger labeled as "uncool" was an old family friend, whose mother threatened to push for Ginger's suspension from school. Reflecting on the impact of this experience, Ginger mused,

And so the thought of being suspended for something I said— And, for, for hurting this girl who I had known since I was four. Just, well, because she was— Well, and that's another interesting life lesson is, was she had been my friend since we were four. And outside of school I was fine being her friend, but inside of school she was weird. And didn't really fit in. And nobody liked her. And so in school I wasn't her friend. But outside of school I could, I could be her friend. And I hurt her. A lot. So that was very significant. (Interview transcript)

In retelling the story now, Ginger seemed to stop herself just short of explaining why she sought to distance herself from this girl, other than explaining that the girl did not fit in. As Ginger struggled with feeling ostracized from the social order of her town, it is perhaps not so surprising that she did not feel she could bear the cost of aligning herself with a girl of low social rank.

Ginger's effort to seek acceptance through reifying the process of categorizing others is not an unusual tactic for a struggling adolescent girl to choose (Cantazarro, 2011). Ginger explained that when she shared the story with her students today, she prefaced it by saying, "Because that's what everybody else was doing, this cool kid, not cool kid thing. And I felt like I had to get ahead somehow" (Interview transcript). To underscore the moral lesson on the dangers of succumbing to peer pressure, however she told her students,

Nobody sat there and was like, 'Do it. Do it, Ginger, do it.' I felt that pressure, but it was me who decided to do it. It was my decision and my decision hurt people. And they all were kinda like, I'm not perfect. Hard to believe. (Interview transcript)

In the context of our interviews, an educational researcher interviewing teachers about their lives and teaching practice, it was not surprising that Ginger framed her life history primarily in terms of her educational experiences. Further she presented these school stories for their moralistic potential, to illustrate life lessons gleaned from the perspective of her experience. In addition to the stories which focused on Ginger's educational experiences, several other themes emerged as she narrated the story of her life. First there was a theme of her father's relative lack of involvement in her upbringing. Ginger described, "Very rarely was my dad left alone with me, because he's— oh my god, I love that man to pieces, but small children are not his thing" (Interview transcript). Complicating this relationship further, Ginger shared that throughout her childhood her father was in and out of the hospital numerous times explaining, "My brother and I unfortunately were prepped in hospitals because of my darling father with massive amounts of car accidents and surgery. Heart attack. I mean, you name it. We used to live in the hospital" (Interview transcript). As a result, Ginger and her brother were raised by "sort of a slew of nannies" (Interview transcript) who provided additional care while their mother

worked. Ginger also described her relationship with her younger brother as generally contentious while they were growing up. She shared that he was “diagnosed with having very, very serious obsessive compulsive disorder, and one of the bi-polars” (Interview transcript). Interestingly, however, she did not attribute their sibling rivalry to her brother’s diagnoses, but instead seemed to feel on some level culpable for his struggles. Though Ginger must know that such conditions are a result of chemistry and genetic predispositions, she assailed herself with the confession, “I tortured that kid. And he– oh my god it was awful. I really tortured him. It’s completely my own fault that he is the way he is” (Interview transcript). Both Ginger’s tendency to blame herself for her sibling’s challenges and her attempt to compensate by being high achieving are consistent with the findings of scholarship on the dynamics in families with children with special needs (Abrams, 2009; Safer, 2002).

When talking about her life, Ginger was an animated and rapid-fire storyteller. Throughout the life history interview, she was often quick to respond with an anecdote, sometimes even before the question had been fully articulated. However, when asked to share an important adolescent scene, she paused at length and then began, “Let’s go with– Let’s play the cancer card. Let’s do the cancer card.... Why not? Let’s do cancer” (Interview transcript). She proceeded to describe the experience of learning of her mother’s diagnosis with breast cancer. To set some additional context Ginger explained that her mother received her diagnosis at the same time that her own mother was dying of breast cancer. Perhaps as a strategy for protecting herself from the intensity of her feelings at sharing this recollection, Ginger went into great detail about the peripheral details of the event. Ginger’s mother had taken Ginger, her brother and her best friend to town to go back to school shopping when they stopped off at her doctors’ office to

receive some test results. After waiting for their mother for some time, they learned of her cancer diagnosis. Ginger recalled,

And we were all just— and especially being there with my best friend it was just, like, she was like, “Oh, god. This is really awkward.” So it was, like, really awkward for her. And we just sort of sat there in shock. Cause there was, like, part of me that still really wanted to go shopping. And then part of me was, like, “Oh my god. Is my mom gonna die?”

(Interview transcript)

Sharing this story as an important adolescent scene it was perhaps not surprising that Ginger’s way of coping with this news was initially to focus on more trivial details before the gravity of the situation sunk in. As a storytelling strategy, it was interesting that Ginger did not strive to retroactively mask her adolescent reaction to this experience. In recalling this experience, Ginger seemed to attend first to the discomfort her friend may have felt. Next she disclosed her initial sense of regret that this turn of events would prevent them from carrying forward with their plan to go shopping. Only at the end of the narrative did Ginger seem to make herself vulnerable to her own emotional reaction at the news. Her first two reactions seemed consistent with Ginger’s orientation to other events in her life. In this story and elsewhere, Ginger seemed highly concerned with what others would think about her and the circumstances of her life. She also seemed troubled when factors beyond her control forced her to shift her expectations. As a listener, I was concerned here and elsewhere that Ginger did not seem to allow herself to attend more to the potential nuance and complexity of her own emotions.

Ginger described moving to New York City to participate in the Teaching Fellows program as the high point of her life history. Reflecting on the process of arriving in New York, Ginger waxed, “It was, like, the second I was just out of the U-Haul it was, like, ‘click.’ And

that's just— It's where I'm supposed to be” (Interview transcript). In many ways Ginger represented her move to New York as a culmination of everything she had striven for growing up. The opportunity to move away from the entrenched social structure of her hometown to a city with a reputation for allowing people to reinvent themselves must have felt incredibly liberating for Ginger. Additionally, when describing the moment she got the news of her acceptance to the Teaching Fellows program she repeatedly emphasized the selectiveness of the program. Upon receiving the acceptance letter by email, Ginger explained, she went for a long run and then immediately returned home to break up with her live in boyfriend. Though she portrayed the fallout that followed as painful, she relayed the necessity of this decision without a hint of regret. According to Ginger, at the time that she applied to the program their relationship was, “sort of going downhill, as, again, I realized that I was actually growing up and he was not really. And that we didn't actually have the same goals and aspirations” (Interview transcript).

Throughout Ginger's narration of her life story several interesting issues emerged. One theme was Ginger's interest in social status and the energy she devoted to her own place in that hierarchy. Interestingly, however, her ability to be transparent and reflective about this tendency indicated that she was aware that this preoccupation was not unproblematic. Additionally, a theme of drive and sense of self-sufficiency emerged from the anecdotes she chose to share. Those qualities laid the foundation for her work as a teacher and may explain her rapid rise at Cedar. In subsequent interviews Ginger's anxiety at having her life and work as a teacher considered alongside the life and work of much older, more veteran teachers was evident. Concluding the life history interview she summed up her trajectory to date by reflecting, “All of these events have lead me to be the person who moved to a city by myself. And interviewed for jobs, you know, without, without my mom standing there” (Interview transcript). In contrast to

the narratives of the other teachers, many of which include reflections on their role as actual and surrogate mothers, Ginger, at twenty-two, is still in the process of recognizing herself as a grown woman, no longer a child. While all teachers grow in their work over the course of their lives, Ginger is still very much in the process of becoming in her identity as a young woman and teacher. It will be interesting to see how the dispositions cultivated throughout her young life will shape her work with families.

IRENE

The last teacher in this study is Irene. Irene is an African American woman in her early 60s. She has been a New York City public school teacher for sixteen years and a teacher at the Cedar School since 2001. As described in Chapter 2, I interviewed all the teachers using the same loose framework. First I asked them to briefly outline the chapters of their life. I followed up by asking them to describe critical incidents in their life history. In subsequent interviews I asked them to fill that history out, focusing primarily on their teaching lives and their work with families. When I asked the other four teachers to sketch out the chapters of their life they all completed this task in brief. Only Irene used this framework as a point of departure, from which she narrated her life history through an uninterrupted monologue. Throughout her narration Irene touched on many of the critical incidents I would later ask the other teachers to address. As a researcher I felt incredibly fortunate that all five of my participants were eloquent and reflective storytellers. Irene's capacity for narrative, however, was unique. It also became clear that Irene's story, though in many ways particular to her, could also be seen as illustrative of a larger context of the history of race and education in America. As I began the task of attempting to put order to a representation of Irene's life story, I found that my efforts fell flat when compared to the flow

of her own words. Consequently, for this section on Irene's life history I have chosen to share the following narrative, taken directly from the transcript of my interview with her. This excerpt is very lightly edited, and ellipses (...) represent any passages that were skipped over in the interest of keeping the narrative relatively succinct.

I think my first chapter would be my arrival. I was born in Harlem Hospital in 1951, about a block and a half away from where we lived. It was in what would be called now an extended family, but I always thought it was just plain old family: my mom, my grandmother, my uncle, assorted cousins. In an old brownstone, that we did not own. But each adult family member had a room, because the brownstone had been converted to a rooming house. The only room with a kitchen was my grandmother's. So we always ate communally. Gramma did all the cooking. She would ask, "So what does everybody want?" And that's how she'd shop. All the grownups pitched in financially, and she would do all the shopping. She did all the cleaning. She did all the cooking. And she took care of me because my mother had to work. So I was very, very close to my grandmother. My grandmother taught me to play most of the childhood games that I learned: jacks and hopscotch and jump-rope. How to play fair in a race.

I was, always told that I was shy. Later on was told that I was timid. I know I'm neither of those things now, but I do remember always being quiet. It didn't seem to me to be a fear. It seemed to me to be a preference. I just preferred to listen, than to do a lot of the talking. Because I didn't say a whole lot, I got to hear things most people probably weren't privy to, so I knew everybody's business. I knew how to stay under the table, and just listen when all the grown ups were talking. So I knew things. I started school in kindergarten. Really didn't like it. It felt like torture for me. Just being away from home. Being away from my dog. I was always concerned

that better things were happening at home than were happening at school. And I couldn't quite figure out why I was there. So for me, school has always been a place to escape from. And I remember that I did that a couple times. I did manage to escape and get home. And was betrayed by my grandmother and brought back. My favorite teacher was my third grade teacher, Miss Golden. I loved her. Sometimes I would see her on the street and smile. And it felt to me like that smile was for nobody else but me. I don't know what effect she had on in any other child, but I know that I always felt that she loved me.

Somewhere toward the end of third grade my mother got a letter. And suddenly life changed, because I needed to go and be tested. And I remember having an IQ test and all kinds of aptitude tests. It was a battery. It must've been about three or four tests over a period of what might have been a month but to me seemed like forever. And this was all preparation for me changing schools. For a brief time during the summer I was sent to a special program in another school where I was taught to use math manipulatives. That was not something that we did in my old school. And then I was finally ready, I guess, to go to a school downtown. This was during the civil rights era, so the school needed to integrate. And they carefully selected children of color to introduce to the school. I later really found out that they would not have gotten federal funding had they not done that. And I was one of the lucky people. I later also heard that it was called "bussing." But they never sent a bus, so I had to take the city bus. And for person who was raised surrounded by such close family members, and never having traveled outside of an occasional trip downtown, it was traumatic. I remember a few times even getting pushed off the bus by big people, or missing my stop because I couldn't push past them. All to go to school, which I hated anyway. Couldn't quite see the benefit of that.

Friends. I had friends there. I began traveling with children who were near my neighborhood. I think I knew one of the girls before we got bussed downtown. But I didn't know her well. The great thing about this school was that it was really clean, and there seemed to be time. One of the things that I remember really well was that there weren't bright lights. I never did like bright lights. And I remember Miss Morrison. She was my fourth grade teacher. And although she wasn't Miss Golden, she was very soft-spoken and I really enjoyed hearing her voice. I liked the way she spoke to me and I liked speaking to her, though I still probably still didn't say much.

I kind of got into the rhythm of going to school. Made some friends. Discovered that everybody wasn't like me or any of the other people that I had known before. It was my first experience being away from home. It was my first experience going to school with people who didn't look like me. And it was my first experience being around people who didn't know me. And I think at that point I did become shy. I remember a time when I was talked to by one of the administrators. She said that she was very concerned because I wasn't mixing, with the other children. And that I should be taking advantage of this great opportunity that I'd been given to go to this wonderful school. I had no idea what she was talking about. I remember going home and asking my mother what that meant, to have an opportunity. And what I was doing wrong. My mother said I wasn't doing anything wrong. But somehow I felt that if this lady had taken the time to tell me that I was, that maybe it was. And in several conversations she helped me to understand that what she was questioning was why the children who travelled on the bus were sitting together in the cafeteria and not mingling with children who were already at the school. We were the first black children to ever come to that school. And what she couldn't seem to understand was that the reason we sat together was because we rode to school together and we

travelled home together. And that just kind of formed a bond, I suppose, for children who kinda felt like maybe there was safety in numbers.

It changed over time. Because I remember Anna Grossman. And I remember a girl name Linda. I remember going to Linda's apartment. It was amazing and huge. And she had a maid. And we all ate in the kitchen. And she invited me to her room. And she had her own bathroom and that was – Whoa! I mean I lived in a rooming house, you know. It was quite a culture shock. Children who travelled over the summer. Went to Europe on a regular basis. Who as a rite of passage got braces on their teeth. You know? That was pretty different. Though I always preferred my life...

At some point in middle school we moved to the Bronx. I remember being continually lost on the train. Trying to get home. And it was very different too. That was the first time we'd lived in a house. The entire family moved with us. So once again it was my mother, my grandmother, my uncle, assorted cousins. I remember that in the summers my cousins from the South would all come. Because there was no work for them in the South, and they would all come to find work in factories here. Because everybody had to supplement their scholarships, so that they could go to college in the fall. And my grandmother would lay out what she called these palettes on the floor. These folded blankets. Everybody would get bedded down for the night. And in the morning all these bedrolls would be standing in the corner. And everybody would eat and go off to their respective jobs. It always seemed like such a party to me. Having all those people. Because I grew up with no siblings. I guess my sibling was my dog.

High school. High school was interesting. It did not match what I'd seen on TV. I really thought that in high school there would be clubs and, you know. Talking to kids now they have the same sort of shock and disappointment about what high school is... By the end of tenth grade

though, I was pretty done with school. Had finally figured a way to get out. I was serving a lot of detention for silly things, like my skirt was too short. There was a dean who used to measure the distance between the hem of a skirt and your kneecap. I don't recall being the only girl in a mini skirt. It probably was happening to many kids. But I think, of course, when you're a young person, things are only happening to you. I was thinking, "Who needs this?" I had tried to negotiate, I remember, with this dean, a schedule whereby I could fulfill all my class requirements and leave early by giving up lunch. And the negotiation didn't work. She was having no part of it. She said I had to have lunch. Which made no sense. At home I tried to talk to my mother about it. Ask her if she'd please write me a note saying that I wasn't really that hungry at lunchtime anyway, so it was ok. I had food at home. But I think she also thought I needed to have lunch. I decided to take things into my own hands, but I didn't quite know how. Until one day.

I went to Taft High School. It was a huge building. It was like a castle. I went down a corridor that I had never gone down before and then went down that exit and came out on the first floor. It was really dim, but I remember this one office with this translucent glass in the door and it said, "Adult Education Office." And the door was ajar, and I saw a sign that said, "Get your GED." And I went in and I just wrote my name in the book, never really expecting anything to come of it. But a week or two later I got a letter in the mail saying that I could sign up for GED classes. I was still in school, mind you. I could sign up for GED classes, and it also gave me a little tear off that I could sign up for the GED. Well I was terrified to go to the GED classes because I thought that people would say, "But you're just a kid." And then they would tell my mother and I'd be in trouble. So I didn't go to the classes. But I did do the tear off. And I went and I took the GED. I got the letter, and it said that I passed and I got my scores. So that meant

that I was home free. I didn't have to go to school anymore. But they wouldn't, at first, give me my diploma. Because, according to the woman at the education department, I had done something that was unfair. The GED she said was meant for grownups who were in school or were at work and didn't have time to go back to school. And there I was a young person who should have gone to high school. And I tried to tell her that high school was killing me. And she didn't really want to hear that. But, as it happened, what she taught me was perseverance. Because I kept at that. I called nearly every day. And I wrote a letter to one of the statehouses. And I got my GED. It actually came in the mail. I felt so victorious. And that's when I realized that you don't necessarily have to play by the rules to get what you need. Not necessarily what you want but what you need. And what I needed was not to be at that school any more.

I had a series of jobs. Interesting jobs. I once worked at Macy's Department Store. Fascinating. I've always had a special kinship to Macy's because my mother and I would visit every Saturday. My mother was a world-class shopper. But I didn't quite understand what my job was. It involved logging in invoices, I think. And I remember asking all the time. "So, what is it that I'm doing?" And pretty much it involved moving papers one at a time from one pile to another pile and stamping them in between. I think I did that for about six months. I worked at the telephone company for a little while. I thought I was going to be an operator, because I thought that was pretty cool. But I didn't get to be an operator. Instead I worked in the dispatcher department where you sent people out on repairs. And that was pretty boring. I found out about a temporary job for the Public Service Commission. I was there for about seven months. I was, once again, a dispatcher, but it was a complaint bureau for the telephone company. It was kind of fun, because I felt like I was doing something that made a difference. Most of the calls came from elderly people or ill people who had for some reason lost their

telephone service and desperately needed it. And it was my job, then, to be a liaison between these people and the telephone company and to get the service restored. And that always felt really good, that I was doing something.

The next thing that I did, I got it into my head that what I needed was a career. I always seemed to be sort of stumbling into things. I saw a sign that said, "You can become a psychiatric attendant." I had no idea what that was. I was, what, eighteen? But I went to the classes. I was the youngest person there. I was at the 369th Armory in Harlem. And we were learning to be psychiatric attendants, whatever that was. And I remember the first day. The entire class was about learning to say "Psychiatric Attendant," which seemed very strange, but I was willing to go along with that. And I learned to take blood pressure and those kind of things. And they told us that it was going to be a six-month course. Only they needed a workforce almost immediately, so I think it ended up being a three-month course. I found myself at Brooklyn State Hospital. And the first ward that I worked in was the schizophrenic teenage ward. And it was truly bizarre and frightening, the way that people got treated there. And most of the time I just wanted to go home crying. And then I did a stint in the geriatric ward. Which was almost as disheartening. People just sitting and waiting for people to visit, who never came. So I spent a lot of time just listening to older people who were very lonely. People who were over medicated. The food wasn't very good. They really deserved better. I couldn't do that for much longer, so I left.

Took care of my grandparents for a little while. And I always knew that I was supposed to go to college. My mother had been the first in our family to go to college and graduate. So I knew it was an expectation, but I wasn't quite sure how to start. Went to a program called College Discovery. I don't know if it's still in existence. It was a six-week program that was supposed to prepare you to go to college. I don't think it prepared me for much of anything. But I

will always be grateful for it because it's where I met my husband. And I made good friends there. But my husband was the true gift in that program. Went to on Bronx Community College. Didn't stay very long. Think I went for two semesters. Got married. Had a baby. Did a bunch of freelance stuff. Wrote proposals for not-for-profits. Took care of my grand parents. That was always something that needed doing.

And then my baby. I guess I did that for quite a while. I had my first child at 21. The next one four years later. Worked for various non-profits, which was great because I could choose to work summers only. And for the most part be home with my kids. That's a mom's dream. So I later became the cookie-baking, "Sure you can have a puppy", stay-at-home mom. Right when my third daughter came along in '83, my sister-in-law died and my husband and I took on her two children. Fourteen year old and four year old. So our family grew very quickly from three to five. And it was, at once, a challenge and I guess it was like a really great experiment. Sometimes an experiment in terror, but mostly I got to really figure some things out about myself. I found out I was pretty tough. Things I thought I could never do, I did. Things I never thought about at all, I did. We managed to feed and clothe and educate five children. And that was quite an accomplishment. So it took me a while to get back to being me. I became a PTA mom, PTA secretary, PTA treasurer, PTA Vice-President, PTA President. Two terms of that, following my youngest daughter through school.

The last year that I was PTA President I met a woman named Abigail Rudolph. I left my PTA office and I was walking home and I heard this little voice calling behind me. And I turn around, and there she is running up the street calling, "Irene!" And I stopped. We talked. And she said, "Have you ever thought about going back to school?" And I thought about me with five kids and my husband and the dogs and a cat. My responsibilities to my grandparents. And I said,

“Weeeeellllll. Sort of, but not really.” And she said, “Well, maybe you can think about it.” And she began to talk. She could sell somebody the moon, I’m telling you. And I said, “Yeah, but I’d have to be in the company of teachers, and ooh, I hate school.” And she said, “You know, what we’re in the business of doing is rethinking schools. We don’t think schools have to be the way you think schools have to be. We believe schools can be wonderful places. There are wonderful schools. Did you know that?” I said, “No. That’s why I’m always volunteering at my daughter’s school. To make sure she has a wonderful experience.” And she honestly talked me into going back with her, to the school, going to the principal. And he signed a form that said that I could go to school. I would get free college credits and a stipend. And I’d be in the company of these teachers who meant to turn the world around. That’s actually where I met people like Daniela. I met Daniela. I met people from CPE I. And that’s where I first got the idea, about two years later, it wasn’t anything instant, believe me, that perhaps I could teach.

I’m gonna say dappled in college. A semester here. A semester there. It just never really felt quite right. I majored once in Family and Consumer Studies. I went back and did something with English. Just so many things, but nothing really. There was nothing compelling to hold me there. I was kind of a will o’ the wisp when it came to school. And a lot of it really had to do with my attitudes toward school that had been my attitudes for so long. That I was being held captive somehow.

I started taking these classes which were really seminars through Elementary Teachers Network. And that’s what Abigail Rudolph was talking about. And there I met all these people who were educators, former educators, educators to be, and also people who were just like me, parents. There were a few of us. And the conversations were not so filled with jargon that I couldn’t follow. The readings were so, I felt, relevant to me as someone whose children were in

school. And I had all these questions about whether or not the schools that we'd chosen were the right schools. And, what was happening to my kids? And, was I doing the right thing? And, what would they become as a result of the schools that I had chosen? That I became more and more curious about myself as a student. And wondering if it was school that was the problem, back then, or if the real issue was the school that I had attended. I didn't know that there were schools and there were schools. And there was actual choice. It opened up a whole new world to me. And I started doing, me and some other parents, a summer invitational. Where we just wrote all summer. We did several afterschool things through Elementary Teachers Network. And although the other parents that had started with me started falling away, I kept coming back. It was obviously feeding something that needed to be fed. I obviously had a hunger.

At around that point my youngest daughter had been accepted to this magnet school in the Bronx not too far from where we lived. And, about half the year into it, she was assaulted by another child in her class because he wanted a lollypop that had been given out by the teacher. Bizarre. And she wasn't hurt, but it was a real wake up call. I knew that that was not a place that I felt good about. Although I was there every single day, thinking that I and the other parents who were there were going to make a difference. And perhaps we did. Perhaps we did. But I also, I guess, had had a window opened for me. And I knew that there was more out there. And I no longer needed to settle for what was the best of the worst. Or the best of what was available to me at the time. And another parent who lived in East Harlem started talking about CPE II. Now, I was not completely unaware of the school, because of the people that I had spoken to. But, you know, I had told myself, "Oh, it's so far. We'd have to get to East Harlem from the Bronx. We'd be late every day." You know? All the things you can tell yourself to talk yourself out of things. And at that point I said, "You know what? How easy is it to do what we're doing?"

And a friend of mine, who was having a similar experience with her child at the very same school, said, "You know what? Today I'm going to call." And she did. And the principal said, "Why don't you bring the kids in tomorrow and let them spend the day?" So my daughter Zoe spent the day at CPE II. And when I went to pick her up she said, "Mommy, I'm home. I've never felt so good in school before." And that was the beginning of my children going to progressive schools. And it was also the beginning of that little inkling, that "Perhaps I could teach," to me saying, "Hmm, let's look into this a little bit more." I spoke to my husband about it. I was not going to box myself in by majoring in education. Just in case this was not what I wanted to do. In addition to the fact that almost everybody in my family was a teacher. Which was another problem because I would just be following in everybody's footsteps.

So I did go back to school. I majored in psychology. My husband said to me, "So, you're going back to school?" "Yeah. I am." "You're sure about that?" "Yes. I am." "How sure are you?" "I'm very sure." "Ok, so here's the deal. You go back to school. And I will meet you every evening after work. And we'll ride home on the train together." And I'm said, "Ok." So I enrolled in Lehman. Once again. And he was as good as his word. He would leave work at the Post Office on Grand Concourse. He would leave work every evening, and he would bring his book. And he'd sit outside the classroom door and wait for me to come out of class. And when I felt like giving up, when I felt like not going, I thought, "He would get on this train and he would be sitting outside of that classroom and he'll watch everybody else file out of that classroom and I won't be among them and how would that feel." I often say that that degree belongs to him as much as it does me.

When I graduated I was going to apply to the graduate school there at Lehman. At that point I had decided I would be a teacher. And I went for a recommendation to the Elementary

Teachers' Network office. And Elaine Avidon said to me, "Why would you consider going here for your graduate degree? Oh no!" she said, "You must go to Sarah Lawrence." "What?" "No, you must go to Sarah Lawrence. Come in." She brought me into her office. She's on the phone, very high-powered lady, you know. She's just one of those people who sort of engulfs you. And then you're just done. You can struggle, but the fight is not fair. She immediately got in touch with Mary Hebron in the Art of Teaching Program. And I guess I was on the road. And that's how it began. That September I was a student in the Art of Teaching Program at Sarah Lawrence.

In the meantime, I had found a teaching job. Because in those days you could teach with a Bachelors Degree in just about anything. As long as the credits that you'd received were remotely relevant to education. So I had taken a ton of psychology. More than I actually needed to graduate. I had done all that work through Elementary Teachers Network. Education, reading about education, studying education. And so all of that was taken by the state. And I got a provisional license. I got my first teaching job. It was a whirlwind, let me tell you. And there I was with this class. I never really expected to get hired. But there I was. I think I subbed for two or three months. And then there I was with this class. It was a first and second grade class in a school in the Bronx and I'm thinking, "What am I doing here?" The day that I did my demo for this class, they were adorable. Adorable these kids. That's how they get you, ya know? And I remember reading Miss Spider's Tea Party. We talked about spiders, and I read Miss Spider's Tea Party. We did some activity around that, like, "If you were a bug would you go to a spider's tea party?" And the children were like, "Oh, no." "Why?" You know. And they went off to do some writing exercise and drawing. And this one boy came over to me, and I'll never forget him. He said, "Can you help me?" I said, "Sure." And I stooped beside him. He's sitting, this little,

little guy in this little, little chair and I said, "What do you need help with?" And he said, "Right here, I don't know what to write." And I said, "Talk to me. Tell me what you're thinking." And he told me. And I said, "So that's what you can write. Write what you're thinking. That was terrific. I love that. And if you put it on paper we'll have it forever." And he started to write it. There was a committee of people that were watching the demo. And when it was all done I realized that I had forgotten that the other people were in the room. And Umberto said to me, "Could you come back and be our teacher. I like the way you help." And I was thinking, "Yeah, I'd like to do that." And I was hooked. And that night I got a call and I was hired and I couldn't believe it. And right after I got over the really heady experience of having a real teaching job, the reality of it set in and I went, "Oh, shoot! What these kids need is a real teacher." And I remember going through that year and thinking "Oh my gosh. What's going to happen when they find out I'm not a real teacher?" The actual teacher that they'd had, had left mid year. She'd decided to go back to advertising. She decided that teaching was not for her. So I was a pinch hitter. But it was one of the best decisions I've ever made: To stay. And when it was time for me to go, one of the best decisions I'd ever made, was to leave.

So how did I end up at Cedar? When I told you that I had subbed for a little bit, one of the places that I had subbed was here. And my very first substitute teaching job was in Daniela's room. And I remember everything about that room. I remember how it smelled. Heavenly. I remember the CDs that she had. She had all these Indian flute CDs. I remember listening to her music. Inhaling Daniela. And just feeling so at home. And I suppose that day it must have been Community Morning Meeting because it was the first time that I heard the Cedar Song "We come from the mountains...." I was thinking, "I'm in love with this place. I love it." I came back and subbed a few more times. Once for Erica. Once for Wendy. And I said this is the place that I

belong. The kids here are like no other children I had ever met. The staff here is amazing. And at that time that I subbed there was no Director. And I applied the following fall. At that time they'd hired Lynda. And Lynda came with Anita, and Sarah Prince, and I can't remember the other person. And I did a demo in my own classroom. That was pretty interesting. There I was. And back then I used to wear these calf length dresses and Keds. And my classroom was huge. It was a double classroom, and I loved that I could just move freely around. The kids didn't have to come to me. I could come to them. And once again I'd forgotten that these people were watching me. I was just in the moment with my kids. And afterward I got a call, and Lynda said, "We'd like you to come for an interview." I came for the interview and they asked me, "Would you be interested in us?" And I thought I was. Because I told you, I was in love with the school. But the problem was that the only thing that they could offer me was kindergarten. And I didn't think that I could be a good kindergarten teacher. I felt that there was something really, really special about a person who could teach four and five year olds. And I didn't think I was that person. So I thought about it a lot. And I called Lynda back and I said, "You know I love Cedar, but I can't. I couldn't possibly accept this position. Because I don't think I'm a kindergarten teacher. And I feel like I'd be, sort of, marrying you under false pretenses. Just to be there I would take a job that I don't think I could do well. And then I'd let everybody down. And I couldn't live with that." And she tried to talk me into it. And I said, "No." I just kept telling myself, through tears, that there'd be another time. Because I was determined to be here.

The following year I almost left my old school. But I said, "Mmm. No. It would be like running away from home. When I leave it's going to be purposeful. I'm going to leave on purpose. I'm going to know where I'm going. I'm going to know what I'm doing. It's not that I don't absolutely enjoy working with my colleagues. It's not that I don't absolutely enjoy the children

and the families here.” Because I really did. Those families were terrific. They just thought teachers hung the moon. But eventually I applied to transfer to Cedar through a school based option transfer. Got the book. Did my research. Applied. And I got this call. And it was Lynda. “Hey there.” And I said, “Hi.” And she said, “So, you're thinking of coming to us?” And I said, “I'm always thinking of coming to you.” So we set up the interview. And I didn't think it was the best interview in the world. I'd worked all day, and I was exhausted. But I said, “You know I just kept telling myself that this is the place that you're supposed to be.” And I was hired. Now there was a lot of dicey stuff going on. There had been three 2/3s and they were going to make it a quad. There was the issue of the library having to be rearranged. Part of it was going to be turned into a different classroom for the other school that we shared the building with. There was something going on with the art room. There was a lot going on. There were negotiations. Construction. Reconstruction. A million things. And the way that I got hired was actually as a long-term substitute for a teacher that was on maternity leave. And I took the job always thinking. “Can I do this with one foot in and one foot out? Because, after all, I'm a substitute.” And the longer I was here I realized I couldn't, the harder it became. And, I started having to think, for as much as I loved being here that I needed to think about other places. So I was looking through that S.B.O. book again and thinking about where I might go. And then, as it happened, the teacher who was on maternity leave decided that she was not going to come back just yet. A lot of things happened behind the scenes, to which I am not privy. But the good news is, I was here, and this was my place. This was my family. And I was happy. And I've been happy ever since. Through all that has happened I've been happy to be here.

In Irene's story, from her childhood through to her teaching life, several important threads emerged. First she conveyed a sense of the grounding force of her intergenerational family. Though Irene had friendships throughout her childhood, it was her extended family that gave her a sense of home. Going forward, her husband and children fuelled Irene's path of self-discovery. Irene's negative feelings about school were overcome by the tangible expression of commitment in her husband's support. Her realization that "perhaps I could teach" came about through her work to support her own children's education. I am always fascinated by teachers who choose to enter the profession, despite having had very negative associations with school. Irene's tendency to make her own way and resist the rules, all the while conveying a quiet and thoughtful presence, may have led her to who she is now: an educator committed to the progressive approach to teaching and learning despite pressures to standardize.

Additionally Irene's story of her life offered an invaluable opportunity to witness what Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett (2008) have argued is the power of the personal narrative to illuminate our understanding of historical contexts. In making their case for the powerful potential of narrative research they elaborated,

Our point... is not to claim simply that history matters, but rather to argue that *analyzing personal narrative evidence demands attention to historical contextualization.*

Conversely, personal narrative analysis *can illuminate the operation of historical forces and of public or historical narratives as they influence people's motivations and their self understandings as historical agents.* (pp. 44-45)

Irene's account of being an instrument of school integration provided perspective on the complicated implications of these events as lived through Irene's experiences as a young African American girl coming of age during the civil rights era. The passage of legislation that mandated

desegregation of the schools was undeniably an essential accomplishment of the civil rights movement. (Nonetheless, scholarship (Smith, 2005) marking the anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education noted that efforts to realize the promise of integration suggested by this historic decision have fallen far short of the mark.) Though this move to rectify the damage wrought by racist policies and practices may have been essential for American society, the implementation of such changes was clearly complicated in the lives of children on whose backs this change was carried out. Though Irene admittedly did not embrace school during her early years in Harlem, the alienating experience of being sent downtown clearly contributed to Irene's feeling disengaged in her education. As white administrators puzzled patronizingly over why Irene was not showing more gratitude for this "opportunity," Irene herself recognized the impact that these experiences had on her as a person. She recalled,

It was my first experience being away from home. It was my first experience going to school with people who didn't look like me. And it was my first experience being around people who didn't know me. And I think at that point I did become shy. (Interview transcript)

As we conclude these rich and incomplete life histories one thing is clear. Looking closely at particularity of the individual life lived can serve to illuminate larger trends in our social history with complexity and nuance. The impact of the women's movement, school desegregation, language politics and policies, contemporary school reforms, and changing understandings of class and racial identity, are evident throughout these stories. The convergence of these societal and historical factors combined with each of these teachers' unique dispositions have no doubt shaped their practice as teachers. In the next chapter, we will see the

choices each has made, the successes they have enjoyed, and the challenges they have struggled with in their efforts to cultivate genuine, collaborative relationships with their students' families

CHAPTER 5 – RITUALS, ROUTINES, AND STORIES: CEDAR TEACHERS’ WORK WITH FAMILIES

Having described the life experiences of the participating teachers (Chapter 4), and documenting the professional context of the school in which Cedar’s teachers work (Chapter 3), in this chapter I turn back to the question: **How do teachers’ life and professional experiences shape their approach to working with families?** I will begin by documenting some of the school-wide structures in place at Cedar designed to foster the relationship between the school and families. These structures were cited by Cedar’s teachers as institutional practices that support them in developing relationships with families. Next I will share two specific strategies that Estelle and Daniela have developed in their own classrooms for engaging with families. These descriptions will provide an important context for understanding the school culture regarding work with families. In the second section of this chapter, I will share and analyze stories that the teachers shared when asked to recall their work with particular families.

School-wide structures related to families

During the course of our interviews, the teachers referred to a number of school-wide structures that support them in developing connections with families. Many of these structures have been in place since the school was founded. As the school was established by a small group of active families working alongside the founding teachers, these structures are reflective of the school’s mission to promote a high level of family engagement. Two of the structures that will be described, Curriculum Night and Parent-Teacher Conferences, are practices that are in place system-wide throughout the New York City Department of Education’s public schools. Cedar has adapted these structures in ways that are reflective of the school’s values. Two of the

structures, Family Brunch and Weekly Gathering, though reminiscent of other schools' year-end celebrations and school-wide assemblies, have been implemented in ways that are particular to Cedar. The school has a number of other rituals in place that serve to bring families into the work of the school. For the purpose of this study these four events will be used to examine the school's approach to cultivating family engagement. The teachers often cited these four examples as reflective of Cedar's general stance toward families, who are understood as welcome and active collaborators in their children's education. Estelle, who taught at another school before coming to Cedar, highlighted the contrast she felt between Cedar and her previous school on the subject of family engagement. She recalled, "Where I was for my first four years the principal was scared of parents." (Interview transcript) There Estelle felt actively discouraged from welcoming families to attend school meetings and gatherings. Though recent educational reforms have mandated that schools increase levels of parental involvement, many teachers lament what they find to be low levels of participation by families (Mapp, 2003). With its many, well attended, family centered events, Cedar's model demonstrated a remarkable contrast with Estelle's old school and many other schools like it that struggle to cultivate family engagement.

Curriculum Night at Cedar

While Curriculum Night and Parent-Teacher Conferences are practices that are common to all New York City public schools, Cedar's approach to these events has been distinct in several ways. At Curriculum Night in New York City's public schools, families are invited into the school for the evening in September or October to get an overview of the curriculum for the year. One notable feature of Cedar's often well-attended Curriculum Night is that, in recognition of the fact that there are many Spanish speaking families at the school, presentations are made

both in English and Spanish. Speakers addressing the whole school community on Curriculum Night may include teachers, PTA representatives, and school administrators. Some speakers begin their remarks in English and have Spanish translation while other speakers offer their remarks in Spanish followed by English translation. This attention to the language, where neither Spanish or English are seen as dominant, seems reflective of Cedar's efforts to recognize that many families at the school speak Spanish as their primary language.

Additionally, Curriculum Night at Cedar historically offered the opportunity for teachers to introduce the families in their classes to the customized curriculum that their children would be covering that year. While at other schools teachers may present documentation of a standardized curriculum across the grade, for most of the history of the school Cedars' teachers each developed their own, individualized curriculum map around a theme they selected for the year. While some teachers worked over the summer to develop these thematic, year-long curriculum maps, others, like Estelle would spend the first month of the school year observing her students' interests and strengths before developing the course of study that would follow together. Estelle described the gratification she felt coming to Cedar experiencing a high level of family support for this approach to teaching and learning. At Estelle's previous school families rarely attended either Curriculum Night or Parent Teacher Conferences. When she joined the teaching staff at Cedar, Estelle was astonished by the enthusiasm with which families participated in these events. She recalled,

I remember being applauded at Curriculum Night, after I described what we'd be doing for the year. That moved me. It was like, "Wow. That's never happened before." And families were just so enamored of and supportive of the school philosophy. It really was. It was all about, like, "We love the fact that they have tons of trips. We love the fact that

they have recess.” You know? “We love the fact that you guys let their questions drive the curriculum.” (Interview transcript)

It should be noted, however, that this approach has evolved over the course of the school’s history. Early in the 2012/13 school year, Estelle described with resignation that this would be the first year that her curriculum map would be identical to Irene’s, who would be teaching the other half of Cedar’s third graders. This year Irene and Estelle met with the families of both of their classes at Curriculum Night together to review the third grade for curriculum for the coming year.

Family Conferences

Another standard school practice that Cedar approaches in a remarkable way is the structure of the Parent-Teacher Conference, which at Cedar is known as the Family Conference. Following in the tradition of other progressive schools, both private and public, Cedar aims to meet with every single child’s family. The New York City Department of Education allocates two days a year to Parent-Teacher Conferences, once in the fall and once in the spring. At most schools, teachers will meet with whatever parents elect to attend on that assigned day. If parents choose not to attend they are not pursued. At Cedar, however, the teachers seek to schedule meetings with every family in their class. As Anita described, “We must have 100% attendance. Even if we don’t meet that week, where the DOE requires. I will call you. I will be on top— Like, you can’t escape me. We will meet. The goal is 100%.” (Interview transcript). If Cedar families are not available on the DOE scheduled day for conferences an alternate time will be established. In cases where parents cannot to meet with their child’s teacher simultaneously, due,

for example, to divorce or conflicting work schedules, the teacher will schedule multiple meetings.

Another aspect that distinguishes Family Conferences at Cedar is that they always involve the parents and the child. As Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) asserted, structuring conferences this way is essential. She wrote,

Children should always be present — and given a voice — at parent teacher conferences. They are the only people who know both the family and the school domains. They are the best interpreters, and authorities on, their own experience. Their presence helps the adults stay focused on their primary reason for coming together in the first place: to support the learning and development of the child. (p. 224)

As addressed in Chapter 3, Cedar's practice of including the child in these meetings harkened back to the commitments of other progressive schools, both public and private. At the fall Family Conference each party involved: parent, teacher, and child, articulates their learning goals for the student for the year. Anita described the process as follows,

I assess the kids before the meeting. So I give them sort of like a baseline, "This is what I notice. This is what your kid can do right now." But more often than not it's a time to set goals. And the children must attend the meeting as well. Otherwise we don't have the meeting, if the child is not present. So it's more about setting goals. The child sets goals. We explain to the kid, "What does that mean [to set goals]?" So the parent sets goals of the child. And I set goals. (Interview transcript)

The goals set at the fall meeting are holistic including targets for academic learning, physical accomplishments, and social and emotional growth. The teachers described this process as often being one of taking a unified approach to the child's development at home and school

simultaneously. For example, if a parent would like the child to help out more with mealtime at home, the teacher will assign tasks in the classroom that support that goal. The spring conference builds on the conversation begun at the meeting in the fall. As Anita explained,

We do two things. I give them a mid-line assessment of the reading, math, writing. I inform them if the kids are meeting the standards, approaching standards, etc. In addition to that we go back to the goals that were set in November, to see if the goals were met. And then we set new goals. And if the goals were not met, we talk about what happened, “Is it because we don't have time to do whatever it was?” Then we look back and think about why those goals were not met and figure out how we can then work on that in the spring. (Interview transcript)

With their attention both to DOE mandated assessments and more holistic goal setting, Cedar’s Family Conferences create opportunities for the child and family to participate collaboratively with the teacher in charting a path for the student. This approach gives the teachers and families an opportunity to share in a conversation about the child that is reflective and generative. As a tool for building the relationship between families and teachers, it allows the adults involved to see each other as working collaboratively towards supporting children’s growth and learning. At a more traditional Parent-Teacher Conference, the conversation is uni-directional, with the teacher primarily reporting to the parents the results of their assessments of the students’ learning to date. The idea of involving the child and their family in a more multifaceted conversation supports Cedar’s teachers and families in considering each other’s perspectives on the child. Irene described the benefit she feels as a teacher working in a context where family conferences are structured in a holistic way, explaining,

I really enjoy family conferences. I really enjoy seeing children with their families and watching the ways that they interact. I enjoy feeling a part of children's lives, and most of the families that I have met here are absolutely lovely. Everybody wants the same thing. They want the best for their kid. Everybody's worry is the same. That they're not getting the best for their kid. Everybody's goal is the same. It's when we have understanding of that, when we reach some kind of a consensus or something, an understanding between us about that, that the relationship is good. It's of course when somehow a parent doesn't feel like their child is getting the best, that things aren't so good. (Interview transcript)

At their best, Cedar's Family Conference offer the possibility to develop a genuine, collaborative relationship between families and the teacher. As teachers working in a school context that has adapted the structure for parent/teacher communication in a non-standard way, Cedar's teachers have the benefit of participating in a practice that supports them in developing this connection. While this structure goes a long way toward fostering this relationship, as Irene confirmed, this structure alone does not insure success. Some of the challenges that Cedar's teachers have faced in fostering specific relationships will be explored further below.

Weekly Gathering

While the two structures above are typical to all New York City public schools, the following two practices, Weekly Gathering and Family Brunch, were developed specifically by the Cedar community to serve the goal of fostering the relationship between home and school. Weekly Gathering is a whole school event that happens every Wednesday morning at Cedar to which families are invited and frequently attend. Because it is scheduled at the start of the school day, Weekly Gathering accommodates the schedules of Cedar's families, who may attend some

or all of the assembly before work and other obligations. At Weekly Gathering the whole school comes together in the gym to sing songs, including the school song, and to view performances and presentations by students of their work. The teachers see Weekly Gathering as a practice that is central to communicating the values and culture of the Cedar School. As Irene described,

I really love Weekly Gathering. That's one tradition that I hope never goes away. Being able to see everyone in your school community. Particularly at the end of the month, when Happy Birthday, Cha-Cha-Cha is sung. *(pause)* Actually almost everything at Cedar is sort of ritualistic in many ways. There's just a way of being a Cedar person. A way of being a Cedar kid. And Cedar kids I think are like no other children that I've ever met, in their confidence, and their— *(pause)* They say what they think. *(laughing)* I love it. (Interview transcript)

Many of the teachers described being especially moved by the experience of hearing the Cedar school song for the first time, whose lyrics are an adaptation of Harry Belafonte's "Turn the World Around." Estelle recalled,

I have a very clear image of coming in for my second interview and I was invited down to see what Weekly Gathering was... I was introduced to the Cedar song. "We come from the mountains. We come from the fire" and stuff. And I remember distinctly being brought to tears. *(laughing)* And I thought to myself, this is exactly the place that I needed to be in. This is exactly the place. I'm so thankful that I landed here. I mean, just the image of kids kind of coming from the sky, the fire, the mountains. And that that was the message being shared, you know, at this community gathering just overwhelmed me. (Interview transcript)

For many years, Daniela had been the emcee of this weekly assembly. During her time facilitating Weekly Gathering the event had some common elements from week to week, but many times the agenda for the meeting developed quite organically. However, upon Daniela's retirement in 2011, the principal asked Ginger to take over her role in facilitating Weekly Gathering. Ginger described being excited by the opportunity to restructure this event to be more explicitly tied into the curriculum, which in recent years has become increasingly standardized across the school. She explained,

Part of my role this year that I've really enjoyed is to sort of revamp Weekly Gathering and make that really curriculum driven. Everything— You know, I know that some may oppose— I'm a really big fan of these thematic units of study that sort of keep everything tied together. I set up essentially sort of like a template of— “This is a routine. We're always going to sit in the same place. We're gonna sing the same song at the beginning. We're gonna sing the same song at the end. And in the middle it's going to be things that are, you know, based on the curriculum theme. You know. We're gonna sing a song that has to do with ‘Where We Are In Time and Place.’ And, you know, this that and the other thing.” So, you know, those are traditions that are really special and unique.

(Interview transcript).

In any community, traditions and rituals evolve as the community grows and changes. However, it is clear that the recent evolution of Cedar's rituals has been shaped in response to the mandates of New York City's Department of Education to standardize curriculum. Estelle ruminated with a poignant sense of regret that in the last two years the Weekly Gatherings have become “less about kids sharing stories of what is important to them” (Interview fieldnotes). Now Weekly Gatherings are organized around a more teacher-driven structure, showcasing how the children

are engaging with six standardized units of study that follow a pacing calendar over the course of the school year.

Family Brunch

Family Brunch is another Cedar tradition that reflects the school's particular orientation towards engaging with families. A well attended and festive potluck event, Family Brunch is held twice a year, once in December, usually, as the teachers explained, around the Winter Solstice, and again in June, in lieu of any school wide graduation ceremony. Each teacher takes their own approach to organizing the Family Brunch for their classroom, but some practices are common across many of the classes. The purpose of the event is to allow students to explain and celebrate the results of their individual and collective work with their families. Many teachers prepared a slideshow of images from the class throughout the year that is projected in the background during Family Brunch, and provided each child in their class with a copy of that slideshow on a CD to take home. Students in Anita's early childhood class all participated in the New York Road Runners Club Mighty Milers program by running together in the park throughout the year. At the Family Brunch held at the end of the school year, Anita presented the students with their medals, explaining,

During the Family Brunch the children will get their Mighty Milers medal. And since they've been talking about it all year round they feel so proud. That's more meaningful, I think, than having a cap and gown and a diploma that they have. It's sort of an object and a symbol that has meaning. And they've worked so hard for. So it's special, even though it's not the traditional, you know, [graduation] ceremony. (Interview transcript)

Classrooms in the upper grades use Family Brunch as an opportunity for students to share their portfolio of work from throughout the year with their families and other visitors. At the Family Brunch, students' portfolios are arranged throughout the room on desks and 3-d work is displayed throughout the room. As Estelle explained, at Family Brunch, "The kids would pretty much act as tour guides around their work. And they would take their parents on a tour of the work that they did this year and culminating projects" (Interview transcript). During this time families eat, mingle, and review children's work. As the morning progresses, siblings visit each other's classrooms. After the individual students' work has been reviewed, the class will gather together to perform songs or a play written by the class. At some point in the proceedings both families and teachers may make brief speeches, expressing their appreciation for each other, culminating in hugs and exchanges of cards and flowers. When observing Family Brunch, I was struck by the level of familiarity and intimacy clearly shared by the teachers and families. As a structure that supports the development of the relationship between families and teachers, Cedar's Family Brunch offers a casual but institutionalized opportunity for parents and teachers to chat, share a meal, and celebrate children's work.

Welcoming families into the classroom: The Star Attraction

During our conversations, most of the teachers described specific practices that they have instituted over the years to foster relationships with their students' families. For the purpose of this study, I will describe two notable practices employed by Estelle and Daniela. As Estelle described, in the school she taught at before coming to Cedar, she found herself frustrated by the lack of opportunity to connect with families. The culture of her old school did not encourage families to be active participants, and when Estelle proposed serving food during Parent-Teacher

Conferences to encourage more families to attend her principal forbade her from doing so. When she arrived at Cedar, the difference in the level of family engagement was palpable and, she acknowledged, a little overwhelming. In order to corral the energy and desire for participation she felt from Cedar parents, Estelle developed a classroom ritual called The Star Attraction.

Estelle explained,

Within the school, we were just used to families being amongst us, and in the classrooms, and, you know, breathing in the hallways, and stopping by, and even unexpectedly. So for me [The Star Attraction] was just another way to have them involved. (Interview transcript)

Over her years at Cedar, Estelle's process for structuring this activity evolved. The routine for The Star Attraction involves inviting any family member that wishes to come to have a scheduled visit to the Estelle's class to be interviewed by the students. Estelle described that over the years parents, step-parents, baby siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles have attended. The ostensible purpose of The Star Attraction is for the class to interview both the child and their family as a means to learning more about their classmate. Families are instructed to bring in three items from home that are especially meaningful to the child, and these items are shared and discussed during the interview. At the end of the process, each student in the class contributes a page to a book about the child whose family visited that day, a document that Estelle called, "a communal representation of who they are" (Interview transcript). Over the years Estelle has tinkered with how to schedule these events to maximize participation, either assigning each family a specific day or asking them to sign up on their own. When participating in the whole group interview for this study, Estelle shared the story of a Star Attraction that had taken place in her classroom that very day. In recounting what had happened, Estelle expressed that she felt

especially gratified because the participating family, who had recently suffered many losses, was given the opportunity to feel joyful and celebrated. Concluding her story, Estelle explained why she believed the structure of the Star Attraction served her goal of building the community of her classroom and bridging the relationship between home and school. She mused,

Sometimes you can put a very loose structure in place and just kinda, like, let it flow.

And you know as a teacher my job is facilitator, essentially, and videographer. And just kind of go with the flow and see whether or not any additional structures need to be put in place. Or not. And sometimes that's when the best sense of community comes forth.

(Interview transcript)

As a teacher, Estelle draws on her own memories of school as a place where she felt confident and supported to pursue the possibilities of her interests and imagination. I believe that this grounding in her own biography has allowed Estelle to thoughtfully design the circumstances that would foster these intimate moments of joy and connection for her students and their families. Experiences like The Star Attraction have created a foundation for collaboration and mutual appreciation between Estelle and the families with whom she works.

Linking home and school through language

One way that Daniela expressed her commitment to connecting with families was through her active use of both Spanish and English in her teaching. Though Cedar is not a bilingual school, in recognition of the fact that many of the families in her class speak Spanish, Daniela actively used both languages in her communication with families in both group and one-on-one settings. She recounted that when addressing families on Curriculum Night she moved fluidly between both languages, explaining that in doing this she hopes to communicate her wish,

Not just that they understand, or that they have the information, but that they're comfortable. That this is a place where I'm comfortable. I don't have to worry. That the translation is for my benefit. It's not to make me feel singled out or embarrassed. So you know, that's why the code switching, rather than just the translation, or having someone else do the translation. You know, so it's an environment that has both languages in it fluidly. Moving in and out of them fluidly. (Interview transcript)

In addition to using both Spanish and English when speaking with families, Daniela made a commitment to providing written communication with families in both languages. Daniela used the following format for her class newsletters.

Of course my letters home are always in Spanish and in English. I still do that. I write it in Spanish and then I translate it into English. And I have this code that I use with parents, and they get used to it, which is that there's a thought in Spanish, and it's not bold and it's not underlined, so it's written in Spanish. And then I slash and that same thought is translated to English and is underlined and in bold. So parents have the option to try to read through all of the languages. (Interview transcript)

Daniela's deliberate approach to language in her teaching was a gesture of inclusion and collaboration with families. Her sensitivity to issues of language was grounded in her own history as a bilingual student and teacher. Though Daniela characterized her language use as *code switching*, García might have applied the term *translanguaging* as a richer description of the dynamics at play. In their work on translanguaging pedagogies, García, Flores & Woodley (2012) defined translanguaging practices as "discursive and pedagogical practices that break the hegemony of the dominant language in monolingual classrooms and the isolation of languages in bilingual classrooms." (pps. 45-46). By translanguaging in her communication with families,

Daniela conveyed a sense of mutual respect, which served her well as she sought to develop relationships with families.

Particular families, specific stories

This next section will explore the teachers' stories of some of their experiences working with Cedar families. These stories were drawn from my individual interviews with the teachers as well as the whole group discussion. In the context of the individual interviews, I asked that they recall experiences from their work with families that were both particularly positive and also stories that were particularly negative (See Appendix C). In the whole group sharing of recollections, the teachers prepared stories in advance in response to guidelines I had sent out prior to our meeting, which asked them to share any experience of working with families that stood out (See Appendix D). As I listened to their stories, I was struck by the variety of experiences that emerged as well as the range in the teachers' responses to their interactions. In my analysis, however, I began to identify themes that emerged across the narratives. Some teachers told stories of brief or quotidian moments, which seemed to strike them as particularly meaningful. Other teachers told longitudinal stories of relationships that developed and evolved over time. As a reminder, these stories were not gathered with the intention of attempting to represent the full breadth of the teachers' work with families; to do that another methodological approach to this research would have been required. The goal here was to examine what stories teachers choose to tell about their work with families and to understand how they themselves worked to make sense of these interactions through the choices they made as they narrated them.

In my analysis of the teachers' stories of their work with families I chose to explore two themes that cut across many of the narratives. The first theme addressed was the challenges the

teachers faced when working across a space of difference with families, whether the differences were of language, gender, race, or culture. The second theme that emerged in many of the stories was how the diagnosis, treatment of, and communication about children's different learning styles and behavior added a layer of complexity to the relationship between families and teachers. While the data from these interviews could clearly be analyzed in a variety of ways, these two themes emerged as a distinct opportunity to explore the ways that these particular teachers' life and professional experiences have shaped their work with families.

Working across the space of difference

As I reviewed the narratives I observed that the teachers' stories often included an aspect of challenge they faced in working across spaces of difference between themselves and families. Often the teachers were working with families where there were differences between them of age, race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, gender, religion, culture, or some combination of these factors working together. The space of this difference seemed to add another layer to the already complex relationship between families and teachers. It also appeared to me that the teachers' capacity to work across this space of difference could be strengthened if they brought an ability to be empathetic to the families' experiences through recalling, either overtly or unconsciously, on their own personal histories. This perspective offered them strategies for diffusing tensions and bridging the space of difference. In addition to the perspective the teachers drew from their personal histories, I also saw their capacity for working with families to be strengthened by the professional context of their work at Cedar. At least in the first decade of the school, Cedar teachers strove, through the values embedded in ongoing professional development, to see children and families from a strength based perspective. In

identifying this perspective toward their work I have named the teachers as *taking a descriptive stance*. This terminology was grounded in the work of Descriptive Inquiry (Himley & Carini, 2000), which the Cedar School was immersed in during the early years. What I mean by taking a descriptive stance is striving to observe and reflect on children and families descriptively rather than judgmentally. Speaking from my own experiences as a teacher and a parent, I have found it all too easy to become bogged down in my own perspective and at times my own emotional response to others' behavior. This orientation clouds my ability to understand the perspective and experience of the other person. Descriptive inquiry asks parents and teachers to regularly practice a process of describing children and their work empirically. (Note: For a much more extensive explication of specific descriptive processes see Chapter 1.) Another important aspect of descriptive work is that these observations and descriptions are shared collectively with other teachers and parents. The aim in working collectively is to open up multiple perspectives on the possibilities for supporting the growth and learning of the child. When I return to my work a descriptive stance I may see opportunities that I did not have access to when faced with the limitations of my own perspective. The Cedar teachers' capacity to take a descriptive stance was supported through their participation in the Descriptive Inquiry work of their professional development during the first decade of the school. Many of the teachers still strive to take this orientation to their work with children and families, but these practices are no longer modeled for new teachers as part of their professional development. In my analysis of the teachers' stories of their interactions with families I found that they seemed to be more successful in their work with families when they made themselves open to the perspectives and experiences of others through taking a descriptive stance toward their work.

“When he lives with me, I’m going to teach him certain ground rules. And those ground rules don’t come from my culture, they come from my human world.”

Cedar’s teachers shared many stories of their work with families, and here I will explore four anecdotes in depth that addressed their challenges in working across difference. The following story was shared by Daniela and involved issues of race and culture that emerged in her working relationship with a white family. Daniela described a seven year-old boy in her classroom who engaged in behavior that drew negative attention to him, e.g. squirting mayonnaise packets everywhere during lunchtime and otherwise provoking others with his behavior. As a result, he was frequently in conflict with other children. Daniela met with the family with the goal of working towards supporting the child in having fewer conflicts with his classmates. Recalling a recent Family Conference when they met to discuss these issues, Daniela explained,

This is what he’s having trouble with. He has very, very beautiful blue eyes, and unfortunately his momma, when he would go home and say, “You know so and so hit me and they didn’t let me—” and all that. And instead of saying, “Oh, let’s talk about that and find out what’s really going on.” She said to this child, “That’s because you have beautiful blue eyes and they have brown eyes and they’re jealous of you.” *(long pause)* And I said, “Wow.” *(pause)* And guess when the little boy made this announcement? At his Family Conference with his mother sitting right there....* And his father’s sitting next to her going *(mimes looking down abashedly)*. The British man. He’s looking down trying to figure out which hole in the ground to crawl into. And looking into **my** brown eyes. And I said, “You know your mom is right. You have the most beautiful blue eyes.

* Note: ellipses indicate my comments deleted from the transcript.

Do you think that's really why the children don't—?" *(both trailing off in laughter)* And she's like, "No, no, no." Trying to quiet him down. But of course he will not be quieted.... And she was so embarrassed. And I showed her that people with brown eyes and people with blue eyes, we all want the same thing for our children. All of them.

(Interview transcript)

Daniela made it clear that she interpreted the mother's oblique reference to "blue eyes" and "brown eyes" as a code for race. Given Daniela's personal history and strong views on racial politics and inequality in education, I can only assume she felt frustrated by this mother's bigotry. I wondered if this frustration might have caused her to retreat from her commitment to helping this family work through their challenges.

As she continued the story, Daniela invoked her own personal history and in doing so highlighted her sense of the difference between herself and this family, specifically in terms of cultural values around parenting. Using direct speech, likely meant to reproduce the voice of her own mother, Daniela explained,

And I was always taught, "That is absolutely unacceptable behavior. Here is why. We won't be doing that again. If you **do** do that again, we're not going to be happy with the results." I didn't need to hear that twice. There was no time. These are kids whose parents are home. And they have this benefit of just going on and on and on. So the other kids who are being raised by families that are not like that are going, "That's not acceptable." You know? So you could go two ways with that. You could, as a parent, say, "Oh, those kids are a problem." And what she would say was that they were **bullying** him. So now it's convenient to say that the brown children, the bigger children, in the third grade are bullying my little boy with those beautiful blue eyes because they're jealous. See where

I'm going with that?... So the first thing I did was get to the bottom of it. I said, "I need to know everything that really happened." So she writes letters. But they come to me. They didn't come to the principal. They come to me. So I said, "I will look into this instantly. And I will get back to you. And then we will take further steps." Because I don't see blue eyes or brown eyes or anything. I see a child, and another child, and a very worried mom. Period. (Interview transcript)

By invoking her own personal history, Daniela aligned herself with the "brown children" in her classroom, the very same children with whom the child was having conflicts. However, in describing her approach to the problem of working with this family, Daniela asserted that she would not allow her feelings about the mother's prejudice to prevent her from responding empathetically to the concerns of "a very worried mom."

I believe that Daniela's ability to be empathetic to this mother in the face of the mother's racism came from two sources. First, Daniela could draw on the experience of being a mother herself, worried about whether or not her children's schools were serving their needs. Second, Daniela demonstrated an ability to step back from the charged racial dynamics of the interaction and take a descriptive stance. It was from this stance that Daniela, while not tolerating the woman's racism, was able to respond constructively to assuage the mother's anxiety. Daniela described that over the course of the year she was able to find ways to work effectively with this family to support their son in becoming more a part of the classroom community. Daniela concluded her story by speaking directly to the family, as if they were there present at the interview,

Because I know you're sending me your baby. And you're sending me the shiniest baby you've got. So I am gonna take care of that baby for you. I promise you. But that

includes, when your baby's not behaving properly, we're gonna figure out together why that is. When he lives with me, I'm going to teach him certain ground rules. And those ground rules don't come from my culture, they come from my human world. Cause I've been in that world the longest. I'm not racist. I'm not gonna *not* help your child learn about boundaries because you happen to be from a different culture. Absolutely not.

(Interview transcript).

Concluding this analysis I wish to highlight the multiple spaces of difference that Daniela needed to bridge in order to work effectively with this family. These were differences of race but also differences in class and culture that resulted in different approaches to parenting. I was struck by Daniela's ability to simultaneously probe and problematize the family's biased behavior while also demonstrating her care for the family and working to support them. Another teacher might have found it more difficult to be empathetic in the face of this behavior on the part of both the mother and son.

“She's not right or wrong, and I'm not right or wrong. It's just we both have different ideas.”

Anita shared a story of her challenges in working with a family whose ideas about gender roles came into conflict with the communal culture of her kindergarten classroom. In recalling the story, Anita began by framing the interaction as an unconscious error on her part, recalling,

So I offended a family by accident. I mean I didn't— I asked the kids — In the school community we all work together and we clean the classroom together — And I asked the kids, “Who wants to clean the tables?” And he said, “I would love to clean the table.” But I don't know him yet. I don't know his family, his background, his culture. Mother was extremely offended. And because I had him do a job that in her culture— that is a job for

females, not for males. So again, I had a meeting with her and I said— And, you know, she's not right or wrong and I'm not right or wrong. It's just we both have different ideas. And, you know, at home he doesn't clean the table 'cause that's— Women do that. And I told her, “Well, let me tell you a little bit about the Cedar community.” And I explained. And we talked about gender and we talked about so many different cultural issues. She gave me a little bit about the history of how things run in her family or her culture. And so, we— it— the beginning was a little bumpy. And after that she didn't speak to me for a little while. (Interview transcript)

Throughout her telling of this story, Anita repeatedly took the burden upon herself of being sensitive to cultural differences and respectful of the family's values, even when they came in conflict with the kind of community she was seeking to build in her classroom. Despite Anita's vigilance about being sensitive to cultural differences, she described the tentative and difficult process of establishing rapport and trust in her relationship with the mother. She continued,

Now recently I just had a conversation with her. And again something came up. I said [to the class], “Well, you know the pencil sharpener's not working. I need a volunteer to—“ I said, “From now on, every week somebody will take all the pencils sharpen them at home. But make sure you have a pencil sharpener at home.” Etcetera. He raises his hand. Because he loves to help. And I'm thinking, “Oh my god.” You know? “Do I give this to him? Do I not?” I don't want to offend the mother again. I called the mom. I said, “Look, he volunteered. I just want to know if it's ok.” She said, “Oh it's absolutely fine. If you need a pencil—“ She's like, “Absolutely. Anytime. If you need a pencil sharpener, I can donate one as well.” Like, not saying, “Because we don't want to do it, but—“ (Interview transcript)

Even in the process of recounting these interactions Anita seemed to be wrestling with questions about how to proceed in her relationship with this family. The sensitivity and thoughtfulness she brought to these interactions, however, eventually helped her to make progress in her relationship with the mother. Anita concluded the story by explaining that very slowly their interactions have improved. She reflected,

And so slowly we're building. And we're working on this relationship. And so, you know, it's just a matter of time. And with time, you know, you begin to get to know each other and trust. And the parents trust that you're doing the best that you can for the child. And so, for example, you (*gesturing to Ginger*) have now the sibling. And, you know, it doesn't work all the time. But most of the time, after you develop a relationship, then things work out at the end. For the child. (Interview transcript)

When Anita began this story she framed it as a story of her unintentional insensitivity. As she concluded the story, Anita attributed that the simple passage of time was the catalyst for improving their relationship. I would argue, however, that other factors contributed to this change. Anita's ability to be acutely sensitive to making this family feel welcome at the school and in her classroom, across differences of culture, clearly made space for the possibility of their relationship to grow productively. Her willingness to listen to the mother and honor the family's views may have created a space of trust and respect that allowed the mother to be open to Anita's perspective. I attributed this sensitivity to experiences in Anita's own biography, especially her chapter at Bank Street College where she felt the alienation of being culturally different from her classmates. Anita experienced the disorientation and discomfort from feeling that one's culture is foreign to the rest of the school community. Through Anita creating a space of openness to another perspective, both she and the mother were able to grow in their views, eventually

allowing the boy to participate in the community of the classroom in ways that were meaningful for all.

"I wonder what happened in the interim that made her think that maybe I wasn't a two headed monster after all."

When asked during the course of the individual interviews to recall a negative experience of working with families, Irene told the story of a time when she felt a barrier she felt between herself, as a monolingual, English speaker, and a Spanish speaking family. She recalled,

I did have a situation with a dear little boy. Really struggled. He was trying to learn to write English. He had a social sense of speaking English. He could certainly make his needs known to people who were close to him. But, you know, in terms of academic English he was struggling. I mean he had only begun to speak English I think the year before. His mother didn't have— she was much stronger in Spanish than she was in English. So, but she didn't have the, uh, benefit of having friends with whom she had to communicate to be able to play ball. So he was picking up lots more English than mommy was. And I think that that was a real problem for her. I think it caused a bit of a distance for her. And she was really upset with me. I was never really clear why she was upset with me. But later on she said that, "He would learn so much more if he didn't have a teacher who spoke English." And, you know, I did not disagree with her. It's not up to me to disagree. And I said, "You know. I don't know. But perhaps you're right. I don't know." And yet she hadn't chosen the bilingual school downstairs. And one morning I was in the classroom. And I heard voices outside the door. This was when we were downstairs on the second floor. I heard voices outside the door. And when I looked out

she was talking to a group of parents, maybe three or four parents. And gesturing toward the room. And what she was saying — the bit of Spanish that I did pick up — was that I was a terrible teacher... (Interview transcript)

In Irene's description was clear that not having a shared language was a barrier for her in being able to develop a relationship with this mother. It is also clear that this parent experienced her child going to school as causing a painful rupture between herself and her child. This experience is not uncommon for many families who feel that, in taking on the culture and language of school, their children are being severed from the culture and language of home (Zentella, 1997). What I wish to highlight in this passage, however, is the generosity with which Irene was able to receive this mother's anger and rejection. While it was clearly painful for her to hear that the mother was unhappy, at multiple places in the narrative Irene took pains to be descriptive rather than judgmental. This stance allowed her to view the mother with empathy rather than frustration. Through the use of phrases like, "His mother didn't have— she was much stronger in Spanish than she was in English," Irene was clearly working hard to describe the mother from a place of capacity rather than deficit. Irene concluded her story with the following coda,

Irene: We later made up, but things were never what they needed to be in order for me to be the kind of teacher that I needed to be for her son. Because he'd hear those things too from her. So the trust and the respect were no longer there. And the following year she moved him to another school. I ran into her as well in the Target parking lot. And she was so excited to see me. She got out of her car and hugs all around and [said] how much she really missed being at the school and missed my class and...

Kirsten: Wow.

Irene: I was saying, "I wonder what happened in the interim that made her think that

maybe I wasn't a two headed monster after all." *(laughing)*

Kirsten: Right. Right. But that somehow you had come to embody all of the problem.

Irene: Yes! Yes. And that was ok.

Concluding the story in this way, it was clear that Irene was willing to simply hear the mother's anger and absorb it. While this did not ease the relationship during their time together, the mother was subsequently able to appreciate Irene and her teaching. When I asked Irene to reflect on how her own history may have made it possible for her to be empathetic in the face of such resistance to her teaching she cited her own experiences as a parent, explaining,

I suppose, having been a mom myself. And a grandma. Understanding that worry that you have when your child is not with you. And needing to know that you can trust the person that your child spends time with. And that that person will do the very best that he or she knows how. And the fact that I genuinely just love people. Love being in the company of people *(light laughter)*. So, I mean what some people would call warmth. I guess. But, for me what I try to be is a blessing to people. I don't ever want to be the person that, when I walk into a room people go, "Oh gosh" *(quick laugh)*. So, and I tend to see what's good about people. I suppose that's what I bring to it. (Interview transcript)

Irene's knowledge of the particular emotional experience for a parent sending their child to school allowed her to be empathetic to the mother, even in the face of the mother's disparagement. Additionally, her tendency to work toward seeing what is good in people, or what Carini (2001) might call, "starting from strength" clearly supported her to work in a way that left some room for the mother to eventually appreciate Irene as a teacher.

“My fear was: This little boy adores his dad. And he's watching me, who he knows is on his side as his teacher, go up against his dad. I can only lose.”

Finally, a story that, if it is not about working across differences in gender, is surely about feminism and Daniela's unwillingness to respond passively to abusive men. Daniela shared a story of her interactions with a father that seemed to ignite strong feelings that were grounded in her own personal history. Before describing this encounter, however, I wish to highlight an aspect of the relationship between teachers and families. When I asked the teachers to describe their experiences working with families, most of the stories they told focused on their work with mothers. On the occasion that they did mention their work with fathers, most of these experiences were positive. Daniela, in describing her work with the family of the blue-eyed boy emphasized that she and the boy's father were able to have a much more constructive relationship than she had with the mother. Clearly, just in terms of exposure, mothers shoulder much of the responsibility for handling matters related to their children and their schooling, (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Reay, 1998) and are much more likely to have dealings with teachers. Fathers who participate more actively in their children's schooling are clearly a self-selected group, which perhaps reduces the likelihood of tension or difficulty. I would argue, however, that in addition to the fact of these circumstances, there is greater potential for the relationship between mothers and female teachers to be fraught. Both are cast by societal expectations for their gender to be responsible for nurturing the growth and development of children. This topic alone has been the subject of much more extensive work (Grumet, 1988) than I will be able to explore here, but I raise it here to highlight that this tension felt like a subtext of many of the stories I heard from this group of women teachers.

Despite her mostly positive experiences working with fathers, Daniela described that one of her worst experiences working with a family was with an abusive father. While the circumstances of this relationship would be extremely challenging for any teacher to manage, it seemed to elicit especially strong associations for Daniela with her personal history. When asked to recount a negative experience of working with families, Daniela shared the following story,

I had a father threaten me. And this guy was— he worked for the federal government, so he had a weapon. Very disgusting, abusive, husband, father, Jehovah Witness guy, from the neighborhood. Who I had a very good relationship with the first year. And in the second year I begin to notice that there's something very wrong with the kid. That he's being very physically abusive to other kids. And he's huge. And I start dealing with it with the family. And the dad starts getting pissed at me. And more pissed at me. So the dad threatens me. I threat— And the worst moment is he's— I always do face time with the parents at dismissal. And he comes to pick up his son. And he's got his uniform on. And the weapon is not there, 'cause he's not allowed to bring it into the schoolyard. But I see the holster. And he's in my face. In front of the kid, in front of all the parents that I'm dismissing with. And he's in my face. And he's doing this to me. (*wagging finger angrily.*) 'Cause I was writing home letters explaining, "This is what he's doing. We need to talk about this." And he gives me this hard time and he puts his finger in my face (*laughing slightly and then pausing.*) And one time Stephen [Daniela's husband] did that and got his finger almost bitten off. And I said, "You don't want to put your finger in my face like that." And I try to control my temper because everybody's watching. And I decide that I'm going to show him what he looks like. Especially because his son is watching. And, and I go— he's doing this to me. (*waving finger again*) And I go,

(waving her finger now and speaking forcefully) “You need to stop shaking your finger in my face. ‘Cause I’m not a dog.” And when he sees my finger go up like that he went nuts. But the way he went nuts was very, very interesting *(gets out of her chair to act out the following scene)*. So we’re there. Schoolyard full of people watching the voices raised. And I’m very impassive. Son’s watching me. Watching the dad. He’s seven. *(speaking as dad, waving finger)* “Nyah. Nyah. Nyah.” And I go, *(waving finger as herself, more slowly than dad)* “Nah. Nah. Nah. Nah.” And he goes, *(gasps)* “You! You’re so unprofessional. I’m gonna call the cops. I’m gonna—“ And he starts pacing back up the ramp. And he takes his kid. And he leaves. *(laughing)* I said to myself, “How come you’re backing up, asshole? Where’s your gun?” You know? Like, “What’s up? What’s wrong with you?” (Interview transcript)

Clearly interacting with this belligerent and potentially violent man would challenge any teacher. For Daniela, however, I believe that her active reaction was grounded in the history of her relationships with men, particularly her father. Daniela’s reference, as an aside, to an incident between herself and her husband suggested that this interaction felt very close to home. Though Daniela described herself as impassive in this interaction, through her active and colorful storytelling I experienced her as having a powerful and not dispassionate response. As she continued the story, Daniela described her sense of power as the dynamic between them unfurled. She explained,

Well one of the things that was scariest for me, believe it or not, wasn’t the physical. I wasn’t. In fact, I wanted a piece of him so bad I could taste it. I knew exactly what would happen when I did this *(waving finger)* back to him. And my shit was like, “Bring. It. On.” I did not expect him to get so intimidated that he backed up like that. But it made

perfect sense, cause he's just a bully... * I— come to find out, he was beating that kid's head against a wall... And the mother knew it. And she had had a new baby. So she was more interested in the baby than him at that point. So he was hurting the baby. The dad was hurting him... It was crazy. And this was a Jehovah freakin' Witness. Oh Mr. Pillar of the Community. He was really sick. But. *(pause)* The— my fear was not about him and me. My fear was: This little boy adores his dad. And he's watching me, who he knows is on his side as his teacher, go up against his dad. I can only lose. Like what am I supposed to do for this kid? And it was a real delicate balance. They didn't remove him [from the school]. They left him until the end of the year. In fact he did middle school in the same building. My thing was I have to be very careful not to disparage the father for this little boy. Because— but at the same time I have to make it clear to the little boy that the things his father's doing are not ok... How do you do that for a seven year old? So I did what I've always done which is I spoke to the child and I said, “No one is supposed to hurt anyone. And I'm really sad about what happened with your dad and I. And I know you love your dad. And you should love your dad. And you should respect your dad. But the bottom line is no one is supposed to hurt anyone else's body.” (Interview transcript)

Throughout this story Daniela seemed to be painfully aware of the complicated role she was taking on by stepping into the dynamic of family violence. Yet, echoing the dynamics of her early history with Stephen she was clearly ready to take on the role as perpetrator of violence if necessary. While no teacher might ever be prepared for such an intense altercation with a parent, Daniela's personal experience with of living with an abusive father left her uniquely prepared her for the complexity of these circumstances. Whether the manner in which she chose to respond to

* Ellipses indicate places where my reactions are edited out.

this boy and his father was the best strategy was not answered in this narrative, nor may it ever be answered. What is clear is that Daniela's concerns, her struggles, and the choice she made to claim an active, powerful, and violent position were grounded in an intimate and personal knowledge of the dynamics of family violence.

The compounding factor of labels

It is clear that the relationship between families and teachers is intimate and multifaceted. In the process of unpacking the meaning of these teachers' stories I identified another theme that ran through many of the narratives. Where issues of special education or notable differences in behavior and learning styles were involved, this already complicated relationship became even more laden. This next section will document how the teachers chose to navigate their relationships with families of these exceptional children and how their choices led them to feel successful or unsuccessful in their teaching. What follows are three stories from Irene, Anita, and Ginger, each of whom took a different approach to the work of communicating with families around the process of labeling or diagnosing children and developing a plan for supporting them in the context of school.

“...All this really well meaning advice, which was making me feel as though I was about to take on a task that was not only insurmountable, but that I was going to feel like a huge failure.”

For the whole group sharing of recollections Irene chose to tell a story of her work with a second grade student named Cynthia and her mother. Cynthia was a girl who might have had a label attached to her. However, at no point in the story did Irene share a diagnosis of the child.

She began by telling the group how she was introduced to the family through other people's stories about them. To give the sense of all the voices that were clouding her view, Irene, as a storyteller, produced direct speech to represent a number of distinct voices. In her delivery she reproduced the experience of being deluged with advice,

No sooner had I gotten the card with her name on it — at reconfiguration at the end of the year that preceded the year that she was going to come into my class — the advice started to come my way. “She’s really a handful.” Uh. “One time she ran away. She ran into the middle of the street.” Uh. “She’s— there’s something just not right.” “She is very disruptive.” “Oh, the mother!” “The mother doesn't listen.” “The mother is not going to work with you.” “The mother doesn't believe anything that teachers have to say.” “The mother herself has a difficult time with the child.” Just, you know, all this really well meaning advice, which was making me feel as though I was about to take on a task that was not only insurmountable, but that I was going to feel like a huge failure. So, I was terrified. But I didn't tell anybody. (*slight laugh*) (Interview transcript)

Though Cedar's teachers had participated in professional development that would have encouraged them to speak about children and families using non-judgmental language, it was clear that Irene's colleagues felt overwhelmed by the challenges this family presented and were not able to restrain themselves. The effect these admonitions had on Irene was clear. They left her feeling like there was no possibility for success for her as a teacher in working with Cynthia and her mother.

After spending the summer anticipating Cynthia's arrival in her classroom, Irene finally met the child and her mother on the first day of school. As Irene introduced Cynthia through her storytelling, she began with the vivid description of the child's physical presence and gesture,

reminiscent of the work of the Descriptive Review of the Child (Himley & Carini, 2000). She began,

In September this child entered the classroom. She's beautiful. I'll never forget. These huge, dark brown eyes that you could just almost fall into. These clouds of curly, dark hair. A rather deep voice, for a child. This was a second grader with *(taking on a deep voice to deliver the following phrase)* a very deep voice. A bit of a speech impediment...

(Interview transcript)

When I heard Irene's description of Cynthia, the lushness and specificity of her language recalled to me Carini's (2001) assertion that, "To describe is to value." (p. 164). Interestingly, however, when I shared this vignette with my class on narrative analysis, some of my colleagues were disturbed by what they felt was Irene's fetishization of the girl's beauty and perhaps also her race. They were especially disturbed by her later reference to the girl as "the original dark haired mermaid" (Interview transcript). I am not sure what to make of the difference in our interpretations of this description. Given my knowledge of Irene, I heard her description simply as an expression of deep appreciation for this child, an appreciation that she developed despite and perhaps in reaction to all the negative views of Cynthia that had been heaped upon them both.

Once Irene had sketched this brief description of the child, she recalled her first encounter with Cynthia's mother who, upon arriving with her child the first day of school, ...Immediately let go with a stream of things that I needed to know, about this child, in order for this child to be safe. In order for the other children to be ok. That I needed to know that this child needed time. That I needed to know that this child needed to sit alone sometimes. That— just so much. (Interview transcript)

In this passage Irene conveyed a sense of feeling flooded with information. This added to the inundation of warnings from her colleagues all before Irene had the opportunity to know Cynthia herself.

At this moment in the story, Irene took a brief turn in the narrative to give some context of the circumstances of her teaching at the time. She explained,

I had, in that year, I think we had 24 children in the 2/3. It was a mixed grade time of Cedar. And so I have one half the class that, thank god, I already knew. And this other half of little ones, some of them crying for their mothers. And here I have this gorgeous girl, like the original dark haired mermaid. And this mother, trailing along, chattering. About all the things that I needed to know about her child. And I'm thinking, "We're okay! We're okay." And finally I said to her. "We're all right. You can go now."

(Interview transcript)

As Irene worked to set this context, a number of important details emerged. First, she identified the structure of mixed grade grouping which helped to mitigate her difficulties in starting a new year. When Cedar was founded all classes were mixed grade groupings. The 2nd/3rd grade teachers continued this practice until 2011, when, in response to pressure from some parents, they joined the rest of the school in following a looping model. (For more discussion on this practice and the policy change see Chapter 3.) Irene noted that this structure allowed her to know half of the class, the rising third graders, and their families as the school year began.

Irene described the challenge she felt in this moment, balancing her need to attend to the concerns of the whole class while managing the particular worries of one parent. Her account suggested perhaps a less extreme version of Waller's (1932) characterization of parents and teachers as, "natural enemies, predestined each for the discomfiture of the other" (p. 68). Waller,

in his book *The Sociology of Teaching* portrayed the relationship between parents and teachers as necessarily adversarial. He attributed this view to the reality that parents are primarily concerned with their child's experience while the teacher must consider the universal needs of the whole class. While I, as both a parent and teacher, disagree with Waller's deterministic view of this relationship, this framework does capture some of the conflict that I imagine lived in Irene's body at that moment of trying to gather her students for their first day of school.

As Irene brought her students up to the classroom, she faced one last chorus of cautions about Cynthia. Perhaps because they had been in class with her the previous year or perhaps because they had heard her mother's admonitions, the children began echoing the warnings Irene had already been hearing. She recalled,

We made it upstairs. I don't even know how we made it upstairs. But immediately the children started to chant almost the same things that the mother had. So: "Cynthia can't do this." And: "Cynthia can't do that." "Cynthia gets really upset." "Don't get Cynthia upset." (Interview transcript)

After absorbing these three, somewhat histrionic, views of Cynthia, Irene was finally able to form her own impression of the girl. Irene's evocative description of this first encounter included specific detail as well as vivid dialogue and sound effects. She explained,

And then it began. A child sitting next to her had a pencil. All the pencils are identical. All the pencils in the classroom are identical. And immediately I heard this wail. "Waaaaaaaaaaaaooh!" Like a siren. "What happened?" "She! Has! My! Pencil!" "No I don't." "Yes you do! You stole it! Aaagh!" And I looked down at the floor and there, indeed, is the pencil that she had thought the other child had. And, "Aaaaagh!" I could reach down. I picked up the pencil. I put it next to her and she goes, (*next phrase is*

spoken calmly and cheerfully) “Thank you. Sorry.” And I'm thinking, “Ok. This is not somebody who is out of control. This is just somebody who has a different kind of an issue. She doesn't have trust of other people.” (Interview transcript)

While we only have Irene's version of this story to rely on, by her reporting she appears to have responded to the intensity of her introduction to Cynthia with a measured and observational approach. Taking this descriptive stance allowed Irene to build on her own impression of Cynthia rather than confirming the messages in the litany of advice she had been receiving.

As anticipated by Irene's colleagues, however, the challenge in working with Cynthia extended to her experiences with her mother. Irene described the initial phase of their working relationship as follows,

That's when the notes and the phone calls began from mommy. I, at that time, used to give my home phone number. (*Light laughter from the other teachers around the table.*) And the calls came. Every night. “Cynthia says somebody took her pencil.” “Cynthia says she's having trouble with this.” “Cynthia says.” “Cynthia says.” “Cynthia says.” “When is Cynthia going to start reading?” “When is Cynthia going to start writing?” “Don't you think Cynthia should be doing better math than this?” “Don't you think?” “Don't you think?” “Don't you think?” And I'm like, “Well, right now, we're trying to get her to understand that all the pencils are the same. And even if she can't find hers she can reach right into the caddy and take another. That's her lesson for right now. This is what we're going to do.” (Interview transcript)

The use of repeated phrases (e.g. “Cynthia says” and “Don't you think?”) Irene, as a storyteller, reproduced a sense of being barraged by the mother's constant queries. Additionally, the mother's concerns referenced her worry about Cynthia's social and academic challenges in

school, challenges that perhaps she felt ought to have been diagnosed or remediated. While clearly overwhelmed by this exchange, Irene nonetheless established herself as the authority on Cynthia's school experience, explaining to the mother what her goals were for Cynthia using firm and factual language. Irene's instinct seemed to tell her that none of the other issues could be addressed before Cynthia was able to trust her experience in the classroom on the most basic level.

Irene's colleagues continued to warn her about the challenges of working with the mother. While Irene heard their concerns, she developed her own strategy for responding. She recalled,

In the meantime I'm hearing from, you know, older staff members and more experienced staff members, "Boy, oh, boy. You're in for it. Because, this lady is relentless. This is what's going to happen." And they were right. But I decided to have, to develop my own relationship with mom. And what I started to say was, "Hmmm. Do you think so? Really? Well, I have not seen that. Maybe we could meet on another day and you could tell me more about that." That became my pat response to everything she said. "Hmmm. Do you think so? Really? I've never seen that. Maybe we could meet one day and talk about it." After a while she stopped the phone calls. Because that's all she was getting.

(Interview transcript)

Irene's new approach balanced trying to make the mother feel heard while simultaneously holding her at bay. This technique, however, only abated the flood for some time. For there to be a genuine turning point in her relationship with this mother, Irene discovered that she needed to take an entirely different and much more generous stance. She concluded her story,

And one day she came to me with a big accordion file. And she asked if she could see me. And I said, “Well, yeah. I’m intrigued.” Accordion file? And she pulls all this stuff out. And what I discover is that this child, this woman, has three tutors. This child is going to Columbia for extra help. The child is getting so much support outside. And so is mom. And what I said to her was, “Wow. You are such an extraordinary mother.” And she just beamed. And she said, “You think so?” And I said, “Yes, the lengths that you're going to, just to make sure that your child is all right. I've gotta tell you. You're one of the best mothers I have ever seen. Cynthia is so lucky to have you as a mom.” It turned our relationship completely around. And it helped me learn not to be combative or even to answer in a way that might be construed as combative to a parent. Because all parents want is what’s best for their kid. (Interview transcript)

Irene’s ability to see Cynthia and her mother with a fresh and generous perspective finally allowed her to find a strategy for easing the mother’s anxiety thereby changing the dynamics of their relationship. Given the history of the family at the school, Irene appears to have been the first teacher to feel successful in her work with Cynthia and her mother. Irene’s ability to create this opportunity for change may have been grounded in her life-long training as a listener who seems to “listen” with all her senses. Taking this approach, Irene was able read Cynthia’s behavior not as a need for control but for the establishment of trust. It allowed her to experience the mother’s behavior not as distrust of her teaching but instead a need for reassurance about her own skills as a parent. I believe that Irene’s insistence on forming her own opinion of Cynthia and her mother, in taking a descriptive stance toward them served her well in working with them.

In the context of telling this story Irene only once and briefly described her approach to working with Cynthia. This brevity may be explained in part because I had asked the teachers to

focus on describing their work with families, rather than children. Though her description of Cynthia was brief, I wish to highlight that at no point in the story did Irene pathologize either the mother or the child. Irene seemed to feel that attaching a label to this girl and her mother would not have served her in working more successfully with this family. Attending to each of them as individuals finally yielded success where other strategies for working with them in the past had failed.

I just remember thinking, “Where are the experts? Who is going to help me, help this child?”

When we met as a group to tell recollections of our work with families, Anita began the afternoon by sharing the following story. Though Anita, who is a kindergarten and first grade teacher, loops with her class, in 2005 she was assigned a student who would be new to the school starting in first grade. She began her story by sharing that at the end of the summer she received a package from the child’s parents that included a lengthy letter, photographs of the child and many articles enclosed. She recalled her initial response to receiving this packet,

And at this point I thought— I didn't know what to think. Like part of me felt really nervous. And, you know, I had so many questions, wondering, “Wow. How am I going to help this child?” And just debating on whether, “Is it a good thing that I know all this information?” Or was it better for me to meet the child first, and then go from there?

(Interview transcript)

As with Irene’s experience, Anita expressed anxiety at receiving this volume of information about the child before having the opportunity to meet them herself.

Continuing her story, Anita set the context of the time of the mid-2000s. Here she explained the debates that were shaping choices that families of children with special needs had to make,

And some of the debates which were going on at that time, which continue— The debates about inclusion versus children in a 12:1 class or CTT, or should— You know. That debate going on. Class size. First grade teacher, by herself with 28 or 25 kids. And [Cedar’s] admission policy. Should we screen children, or should we just— It’s open policy. Everybody comes in and we help every child. As best as we can. So I’m thinking about all of this that summer. (Interview transcript)

Though she had alluded to it by referring the context of special education services at the time, at four minutes into telling her story, Anita finally introduced the child’s diagnosis.

So the child enters my classroom. And the child has certain special needs. So I was told that the child was diagnosed with autism or aspergers. And so now I’m wondering, “Ok, you know, how can I help this child? I don’t know a lot of information.”... * So, you know, I immediately realized that I had to start doing a lot of research. And start learning. Because I really didn’t know a lot about this.... The wonderful thing is that the family was always extremely supportive. The family— They knew a lot about, of course, their child and what the child needed. So we ended up working as a team.... I remember one specific day when we had one of the IEP meetings.... What I remember about that day is that the mother was crying. And I kind of wanted to cry. And, we’ve, I felt— You know. I became so close with the family. And I felt like I wanted to advocate for the child. And we kind of felt a little upset, because we didn’t know how. We didn’t know how to help

* Note, throughout the passage I have edited out Anita’s asides for the sake of clarity and flow. Ellipses indicate places where text from the transcript was deleted.

the child. And so this mom, the mom was crying. Because academically the child was strong. Child can read. Math. Everything. So, we were trying to figure, “How do we help the child? How do we? When there were so many limited resources in the school or in the DOE.” Cause the child can read. The child can write. The child can do this. But the child had so many other needs that we didn't know how to— Sort of, like, we're trying to help the child, but no one knew, like, which direction to— How to, how to help... And so, it was a year of a lot of learning for both— I, I learned a lot. And working alongside with the family. It was just incredible. We came so close to the family. (Interview transcript)

It is clear that Anita found it to be emotional and challenging work to find ways to support this child at school. Throughout her story, Anita expressed her strong sense of alignment with the family. Her story seems to disconfirm Waller's contention that parents and teachers are natural enemies. Though both Anita and the mother expressed great sadness and frustration, these emotions did not produce tension between the teacher and family, quite the opposite. Taking this journey together seems to have brought about a closeness. Closing her story, Anita reflected on the ongoing relationship the family has with the Cedar community. She noted,

I look back, and I feel like I tried so hard to support the family. And I had no idea what I— I felt like at that moment I was like, “I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying my best.” And they remember it. And sometimes the mom says, "Wow. You know, thank you. We can't thank you enough for that year." And, you know, I just remember thinking, “Where are the experts? Who is going to help me, help this child?” And in a strange way I did. We were all the experts. We were all learning together and helping the child. There was no, like, “it” person. We were all helping. All at the same time. And so I feel like we, as a school community, going back to the word community, we were all learning about

this topic. And helping each other. And I'm really close to the family now. And I just feel like (*laughing*) we're family. I feel like I'm part of the family now. (Interview transcript)

Though Anita began this story with a series of questions that illustrated her sense of uncertainty she closed it by marveling the concrete progress she and the family were able to make by working together. I would argue that part of what made this collaboration successful was Anita's willingness to cede her position of expertise as a teacher. She took the vulnerable stance of admitting that there was much she needed to learn and was able to receive the parents' expertise about their child. Additionally when both she and the mother felt at a loss, Anita aligned herself in a deeply human and vulnerable way with her emotional investment in the family's struggle. Anita's willingness to open herself up to the uncertainty of the process resulted in both teacher and family learning together and from each other. Throughout this story Anita referred repeatedly to the ways she felt initially unprepared to support this child. Yet I believe that Anita's personal experience as a child who struggled to express herself in school offered her a unique perspective and capacity for empathy with this child. Further, I believe that her openness to working collaboratively with the family was grounded in her experiences at the Cedar school of working with the descriptive processes.

“What if I accidentally tell them to do the wrong thing?”

Ginger shared a story that echoed Anita's story of the strong emotions and feelings of uncertainty elicited when working with children with special needs. In this case however, Ginger seemed to feel that she needed to bear the burden of finding a solution on her own. Ginger shared her experiences working with both children, a younger brother and older sister, from an Albanian immigrant family. In her first year as a self-contained fifth grade teacher she taught the family's

daughter, Arta. Ginger was able to feel successful in her work with Arta when she awakened the girl's love of reading by introducing her to the Fancy Nancy series. She explained that because of her success with Arta, the parents trusted her wholeheartedly to make educational decisions for their children. In her second year as a teacher, Ginger was no longer in the classroom but worked one on one with the son, providing special education services to him. Reflecting on her relationship with the family, Ginger reported a tremendous amount of anxiety that she felt because the family has allowed her to make important educational decisions for their children. She elaborated,

It almost scares me a little bit. Because I wonder sometimes if they're too trusting. And that especially with compliance and all of these things that we have to do. I mean, we're in the system we're in. Not necessarily saying that all the things we have to do are in fact what are best for their kids. And it— So it makes me nervous that when I— You know, they trust me so wholeheartedly because I found Fancy Nancy. But, you know, that was a fluke. And it scares me that I'm— You know, they trust everything that I do. And I don't know that I should be trusted. You know. Entirely. I'm certainly not doing everything I can. And so that kind of scares me, when they're like, "Whatever. Whatever you want. Whatever you do. You saved Arta, so whatever you do." And I'm like, "Mmmmm. I found Fancy Nancy. That's about it." And it scares me that they are so— I don't want, I don't want their trust in me to— You know. What if I lead them in the wrong— What if I accidentally tell them to do the wrong thing? What if I have to get them to sign something and I—? You know, like, should Arta have left self-contained? (*speaking rapidly in a high pitched voice of worry*) I don't know! But I had to get them to sign it. I didn't have a choice. So that's— You know. All I want is the best for their kids. And

it's— I'm so happy to have that relationship with them. But it's also, it's a little scary. It's a little scary to have that. To have someone put that much faith in you. (Interview transcript)

Throughout her telling of this story Ginger's anxiety was evident, especially through her reiteration of the words scares and scary and her repeated depiction of the family's trust in her as a burden. As a teacher trained in special education, Ginger seemed to feel constrained by a system rife with issues of legality, concerned with issues of "compliance" and signed paperwork. Ginger's story echoed Anita's sense of feeling overwhelmed by the need to be the expert in the room, but rather than finding comfort in taking on that task collaboratively, Ginger seemed to feel the weight of the family's expectations were hers to bear alone. Perhaps Ginger's conception of the system of special education left her feeling that both she and the family were positioned as fixed legal entities, rather than collaborators who might make themselves vulnerable to the challenges of working through their uncertainty together. Further, in Ginger's own history she seemed to have carried a sense of needing to be exceptional and exemplary. This may have made it difficult for Ginger to publicly cede her role as expert, even when the weight of this responsibility clearly caused her to feel enormous pressure and self-doubt. Also, as a new teacher at Cedar, Ginger did not have the benefit of participating in the process of Descriptive Inquiry which might have offered her a model for being open to the perspectives that others, both her students' families and her colleagues, could bring to bear in supporting Ginger in her work.

Aside from being interesting vignettes of teachers work with families, where do these seven stories leave us? While I do not offer these narratives as representative of the full breadth

of teachers' experiences with families, I believe that, considered alongside each other, this collection has its own story to tell about how we can prepare teachers to work more effectively with families. In the next chapter I will explore what I see as the implications of this work for teachers, families, and teacher education. Suffice it to say, the teachers' varied approaches to their practice, particularly when working to develop trusting and collaborative relationships with families, were shaped by the experiences of their personal and professional histories. Throughout this collection I saw evidence of teachers' capacity for empathy, for sensitivity to nuance, for thoughtfulness about the impact of their approach, to have been grounded in their personal histories. Further, when the teachers were able to use their own observational skills, their human capacity to take a descriptive stance, to form their own views on children and families, they often seemed to be more successful in forging genuine and collaborative relationships with families. This was especially true when faced with the challenge of working across spaces of difference or when confronting the added challenge of working with exceptional children.

CHAPTER 6 – IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Reviewing the narratives shared in this study it is clear that the relationship between teachers and families is a deeply human one that is complicated and enriched by a number of factors. The teachers interviewed for this study candidly and thoughtfully shared their successes and also their struggles. Their stories of interactions with families contained moments of warmth and connection but also the painful vulnerability of working through the uncertain and complicated process of nurturing children's growth and learning. While I ultimately disagree with Waller's (1932) assessment that teachers and families should be understood as natural enemies, I know for myself as a teacher, parent, and researcher that working to develop true partnerships is never an uncomplicated process. While many outside of the field of education imagine that teaching is merely the delivery of content, anyone who has spent time in classrooms knows that teaching requires a breadth and depth of knowledge unique to the field (Shulman, 1987). In this final chapter I will argue that we can only understand teaching as a deeply human practice, never more so than when teachers are working to cultivate connections with families. Teachers bring the perspective of the lives they have lived and the sensitivity of their observations of children and families to bear in developing strategies for responding to the complexity of this task. I will explore how contemporary grand narratives about the presence or absence of the teacher in teaching have impacted the teaching lives of the teachers interviewed for this study. Finally I will make recommendations to the field of teacher education, recommendations that I believe would strengthen teachers' capacity to feel successful in their work with families.

Where is the teacher in the teaching?

At the heart of recent educational reforms throughout the United States and especially in New York City have been two ironically contradictory grand narratives regarding the presence or absence of the teacher in the process of teaching. At one end of the spectrum there is the grand narrative that asserts the importance of Teacher Proofing or Standardizing Curriculum. When Bloomberg assumed control over New York's system of public education he railed against a problem he perceived, that schools were not following any unified approach to curriculum and pedagogy. Bloomberg's educational reform platform, titled Children First, emphasized that it would finally focus on the needs of students by holding teachers accountable to teach using curriculum and pedagogical approaches as dictated by the schools' chancellor. The discourse of the Children First platform echoed the mandates of the Bush administrations' No Child Left Behind legislation, which asserted that these reforms would provide the only remedy to the widening achievement gap. Journalist Sol Stern (2009), an early supporter of Bloomberg's effort to assume control over an admittedly unwieldy and dysfunctional system, recalled the process by which the mayor sought to bring order to a chaotic system. Beginning by citing Bloomberg himself he elaborated,

“At every level, we have replaced an old school system where responsibility was diffused and confused,” [Bloomberg] said at a press conference as the 2003-2004 school year began. “There is [now] a direct link from the teacher's desk in the classroom right to the mayor's desk.” What the mayor didn't say was that this link carried messages in only one direction. In fact he was about to launch a three year period of micromanaging teachers and principals to an extent unprecedented in American K-12 education. Agents of the

chancellor (euphemistically called ‘coaches’) were dispatched to almost all of the city’s twelve hundred schools to make sure that every educator marched in lockstep... (p. 148)

Diane Ravitch (2010), another early supporter of Bloomberg’s plan to oversee the schools, noted that, once it had been implemented, “Many teachers complained of micromanagement, since they had to follow the new directives about how to teach, even if they had been successful with different methods.” (p. 73) Under the grand narrative of Standardization, it was assumed that children would only be served if teachers citywide were held to a uniform approach to curriculum and pedagogy. It was important that this effort at standardization be two pronged, addressing both the content of curriculum as well as strategies for teaching. Again, Stern described,

Starting in 2003, the DOE created a re-education program for its eighty thousand teachers, several thousand principals and assistant principals and two thousand new math and reading coaches. Each teacher received a six-hour CD-ROM laying out the philosophy behind the new standardized pedagogical approach that he or she was expected to follow to a T. (p. 148)

The clear subtext of this grand narrative was that teachers could not be trusted to make their own determinations about how and what to teach. Under Children First, successful teaching would be defined as uniform delivery of a standard approach to curriculum and pedagogy. Where in this narrative, one might ask, was there space for the presence of the person of the teacher?

Interestingly, this reframing of successful teaching appeared to run in contradiction with another grand narrative popularized by recent education reforms, the narrative of the Value Added Teacher. The phrase “value added” refers to a new process by which teachers have begun

to be evaluated by the results of their students' scores on high stakes, standardized tests. As Ravitch (2010) explained the process,

If you compare the test scores of specific students from year to year, or from September to June, then you can pinpoint which students got the biggest gains and which made no gains at all. The scores of the students can be matched to their teachers, and patterns begin to emerge, making it possible to identify which teachers regularly get large gains in their classes, and which get few or none. Using value added scores, districts would be able to rank their teachers by their ability to increase gains. Those at the top would be considered superstars, and those at the bottom would improve or get fired. (p. 180)

The concept of the Value Added Teacher was reintroduced recently as a term when New York City school children's test scores were released as part of the highly controversial practice of publicizing the results of teacher evaluations (Butrymowicz & Garland 2012). This approach to evaluating teachers certainly begs the question of whether a teacher's ability to raise test scores actually represents effective teaching. For the present, however, this method of teacher evaluation seems to be the dominant view held by most people in power over our system of public education, from Bloomberg to Walcott, Obama to Duncan, who seem unified in the belief that teachers who raise test scores are categorically better than those who do not. While many fundamentally disagree (Goodman, Shannon, Goodman & Rapoport, 2004; Meier, Kohn, Darling-Hammond, Sizer, & Wood, 2004) with this narrow view of teaching and teacher quality, in the last ten years of education reform, when those in power have argued for merit pay and other rewards, this is surely the measure of teacher quality to which they are referring.

Bloomberg's first chancellor, Joel Klein, invoked his own autobiography to make an argument for recognizing and rewarding teachers of quality. As Bloomberg worked to defend his

decision to appoint a lawyer with no experience in education as the head of the country's largest public school system, he focused on Klein's personal narrative in which Klein characterized himself as a child who was able to elevate himself out of public housing through exposure to exemplary, public school teachers. Interviewed for a profile in the New York Times in the fall of 2003, Klein described himself by saying, "I was a kid from the 'hood,' he said. 'In many ways, my years in high school were the happiest years of my life.'" Though the characterization of Klein's disadvantaged upbringing has subsequently been contested (Rothstein, 2012), the narrative of his autobiography frequently included descriptions of a beloved high school teacher whose good teaching lifted Klein from the destiny of his working class background and made him the success he is today. Drawing on the lessons gleaned from Klein's autobiography, he and former Washington DC Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee concluded that "The single most important factor determining whether students succeed in school is not the color of their skin or their ZIP code or even their parents' income—it is the quality of their teacher" (Klein & Rhee, 2010). While a political economy critique (Anyon, 1997) would argue that placing the burden of lifting children out of poverty cannot and should not rest on the teachers' shoulders alone, education reform luminaries such as Klein, Rhee and Duncan (2010) have endowed the Value Added Teacher with the power to perform miracles. This miraculous work is rewarded with public acclaim, through the release of teacher scores (Butrymowicz & Garland 2012) as well as merit pay and financial rewards for principals and schools. Citing his initial optimism at Bloomberg's assumption of mayoral control, Stern (2009) wrote "My hope was that a tough, goals-oriented mayor, knowing that the electorate would hold him accountable for performance of the schools, might finally cut through the systems' bureaucratic inertia and create powerful incentives for excellence in the classrooms." The repercussions of this system of incentives

remains highly contested and unresolved. As Ravitch (2010) noted, “There is a paucity of evidence that paying teachers to raise test scores leads to anything other than teaching to the test.” (p. 192) Equally if not more disturbingly the high-stakes environment related to testing resulted in allegations of a cheating scandal, even under the watchful eye of such a poster child for the accountability movement as former DC Schools’ Chancellor Michelle Rhee (Winerup, 2011).

How are we to resolve the apparent contradiction of these two grand narratives: the drive to Teacher Proof and Standardize Curriculum vs. the notion of a Value Added Teacher. The first narrative suggests that removing the impact of teachers’ subjective selves from their teaching is the only hope for providing success, particularly for urban school children. By the second narrative, exemplary, individual teachers can and do stand out as superior to their colleagues. As Ravitch argued above, by the standards of today’s education reformers, exemplary, individual teachers may only be considered only exemplary because they are most effective at delivering a standardized approach to curriculum and pedagogy and raising students test scores. However, by Klein’s own admission, quality teaching is about much more than delivering standardized curriculum. Reflecting on his own educational experiences in 2011, Klein wrote,

I can identify the exact educational experience that gave me my life. It was 50 years ago, thanks to Sidney Harris, my physics teacher, at Bryant High School in Queens. I had grown up in public housing. No one in my family had attended college. I had no appreciation of reading or cultural activities. Yet Mr. Harris saw something that I hadn’t seen in myself. A solid-enough student, I was most likely on my way to a nearby public college but not especially interested in learning. Mr. Harris stayed after school to introduce me to Einstein, teaching me the joy of struggling to master complex material. I

was given curiosity and confidence by a New York City public-school teacher... My experience with Mr. Harris inspired me to become the New York City schools chancellor. I realized, through him, that the potential of students in inner-city schools is too often untapped. We can fix that. Demography need not be destiny. Sidney Harris taught me that as well.

In Klein's own estimation, great teachers do more. They incite curiosity and confidence. They introduce students to complex concepts. They convey their belief in their students' capacities. As the teaching relationship is necessarily a human relationship, how then can teaching possibly be teacher proofed or standardized?

Returning to the question of how teachers' lives shape their approach to working with families, where does that leave us? Reviewing the narratives shared in this study, I found it clear that teachers bring their own particular perspectives to their work with children and their families, and that these perspectives are grounded in the successes and struggles of the lives they have lived. As we work to prepare teachers to do the difficult and multifaceted work of establishing relationships with families we must find ways for them to reflect on the ways that their life experiences have shaped them as educators. In the next section I will use the theory of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) to develop my argument that we must recognize and value teachers as embodied practitioners.

Teachers as embodied practitioners

In his work *The Phenomenology of Perception*, (1945) Merleau-Ponty argued, among other things, that we must understand that human beings shape their being through a series of sensual encounters with "the perceived world." As such, people are recognized as embodied

beings, shaping and adapting their approach to the world through their experiences of the phenomena they absorb. Applying Merleau-Ponty's understanding of being to teaching, we must recognize the embodied knowledge that teachers bring to their work. Teachers navigate the complex, human terrain of their classrooms and schools through the information gathered by their whole, human selves.

A stance which understands teachers as embodied practitioners stands in contrast to the prevailing view in contemporary education reform, which posits that scripting or “teacher proofing” curriculum is the only way to improve the quality of public education. At the local and national level, educational mandates seem to suggest that removing the influence of the flawed, human body of the teacher from the equation is the only way to insure quality teaching. In this grand narrative, providing schools with curriculum grounded in “scientifically based research” that can be followed to the letter is the formula for student success. Desired pedagogical strategies are referred to as “best practice”, a phrase that suggests a prescriptive notion of the development of teachers' approach to pedagogy. If only teachers would do exactly what administrators far removed from the classroom tell them to do, students would learn better and schools would work. The threat that teachers would act on their own knowledge and instinct are anathema to many prevailing views of school improvement.

Illustrations of this grand narrative are pervasive in the policies and practices of the New York City Department of Education including, I would argue, in how they select and train the next generation of teachers through programs like the New York City Teaching Fellows program. The Fellows program selects highly-educated, mostly young, future teachers, often coming from outside the NYC communities in which they teach, to be molded into expert practitioners. The program may have contributed to what has been noted as a shift the

demographics of New York City's teaching force, bringing in an increasing number of white teachers and proportionally decreasing the number of teachers of color (Green, 2008). While no one would deny the importance of addressing chronic teacher shortages in urban school districts, favoring programs like the Teaching Fellows over, for example, programs which might cultivate new classroom teachers from among the existing pool of paraprofessionals and school aides, suggests that according to the Department of Education deep knowledge of urban communities is considered secondary to deep knowledge of educational research.

Merleau-Ponty was not the first or only philosopher to extend the idea of the role of perception in shaping human understanding of our worlds. But in establishing what Foucault might call a genealogy of the Cedar teachers' conception of teacher knowledge Merleau-Ponty's work is an essential citation. Over the first decade at the Cedar School, school staff regularly participated in institutes and workshops organized by the Prospect Center. The descriptive processes developed for understanding children and their work developed by Patricia Carini at the Prospect Center were explicitly grounded in Merleau-Ponty's theories. During the tenure of the first two Cedar principals, Cedar teachers and administrators would decamp every fall en masse to the Prospect Center's annual Fall Conference, a working weekend which would serve as the school's annual retreat. For the first decade of the school's history school staff would meet regularly for working sessions using the descriptive processes to support their growth as a teaching community and to support their work with children and families.

While most of the teachers participating in this study are Cedar school veterans, whose work is steeped in the old ways of thinking about children and teaching, Ginger as a second year teacher and participant in the Teaching Fellows program brings a stance that has clearly been shaped by current thinking of the New York City Department of Education. Ginger's beliefs

about teaching are sanctioned and celebrated under the current system, so much so that in her second year in the field she “ascended” out of the classroom and into a more managerial, supervisory role, overseeing special education services for the school. These contrasting views on the role of the teacher in teaching became evident in the whole group discussion that took place between all five of the teachers and myself. The contrast in these views was most evident in the pair of responses by Ginger and Estelle to my question about what teachers need to support their work with families.

Following the teachers’ sharing of recollections I initiated our ongoing discussion by asking the teachers to respond to the following questions,

Given everything that we’ve just heard, what do teachers need to do this hard work with families? Where do teachers get that? And what can schools provide? I’m thinking of that very broadly, in terms of teacher education, in terms of mentoring, in terms of schools’ values, rituals.... (Interview transcript)

The conversation that ensued revealed some very interesting contrasts in terms of the teachers’ understandings of what teachers need in order to be successful in their work with children and families. Interestingly, not all of the teachers responded directly to the question as it relates to work with families. Daniela and Irene responded to my question by describing the outside pressures that teachers feel which inhibit their ability to be successful. Daniela was the first to respond and her reply was an angry rant against the current system that makes teachers feel under great scrutiny. She began forcefully,

We don’t need people breathing down our necks and up our asses the way that the world has now decided to do. Because the work of taking care of children is much more than just teaching children. It is so much more. It implies that you are literally, physically,

making sure that that person is physically safe, emotionally safe, intellectually challenged and interested and engaged. And that you yourself are feeling all those ways. You cannot do it for the students if you are not feeling it. (Interview transcript)

Though I had posed the question to ask the teachers what they needed to have in place in order to take on the challenging work of forging relationships with families, Daniela seemed to feel overwhelmed by the oppression, which she characterized using highly visceral terms, that teachers face in the current system. In her response, Daniela made impassioned reference to the physical work of teaching, physical work that is done by teachers' bodies. She could not begin to answer my question without speaking out first against the many forces that challenge teachers in doing their work. As she continued she began to address my question, elaborating, "Most importantly we need to feel security. People need to know that their best efforts and best intentions are going to be acknowledged. They're not going to be judged by some number that says very little" (Interview transcript). Clearly Daniela was responding to the pressures imposed by drive toward accountability that permeates both the push toward standardization and the notion of a value added teacher. By not speaking directly to work with families in her response, Daniela seemed to suggest that if teachers do not feel safe and respected in their work they cannot possibly take on the complex work of developing relationships with families.

Irene followed Daniela by elaborating on the pressures that the current educational climate places on children, their families, and their teachers. She began by criticizing the practice of timing children's ability to complete a task, like reading, as measured through high stakes tests. She ruminated,

Why is it so important, not just to know the right answer, but to know it in x number of minutes? Why must even your reading be timed? What does it matter if you can read a

page a minute, or if you can read two pages a minute? Or if it takes you an hour to read a short chapter? If in the end you got the point that the author wanted you to get. I mean people don't write books for people to read them a page a minute. (Interview transcript)

As she continued, Irene conveyed a sense of allegiance with parents who also feel judged when their children do not develop according to an external timetable. Though in this context Irene was not speaking directly to parents but her colleagues, she switched the voice of her perspective to speak from her knowledge of the pressures that mothers face, and in doing so aligned herself as a teacher with parents. She emphasized the importance in,

Being trusted to know that— You know, we make this huge, huge deal about what age some child learned to use the toilet for the first time. Or, you know, “Oh, good for me, I must be a great mother because my child walked at nine months.” “Oh my gosh, what's wrong with me? Mine is twelve months old and she's still crawling.” You know, in the end, unless there's something really, really seriously the matter, everybody gets toilet trained. Everybody walks and talks. In the end it doesn't really matter. And you know, it's true. For reading and writing. And all those other things. But where is the purpose of those things? And where is that looked at while we're busy timing everything. So I'm gonna say trust and time. (Interview transcript)

While Irene's response began by echoing Daniela's tone of protectiveness towards teachers, in taking on the voices of mothers she forged an oblique alliance with parents, who, like teachers, face scrutiny and judgment from the outside world. In Daniela and Irene's responses each articulated the challenges that teachers face living and working at the cross-hairs of the accountability movement, which has produced the drive toward standardization and the notion of the value added teacher. From their perspectives teachers' very bodies, metaphorically or not,

and their knowledge about children and teaching are under attack. In choosing not to address my question about their work with families concretely, both seemed to communicate that when they themselves feel oppressed by the conditions of their work, they may be hard pressed to find the energy to do the important work of cultivating collaborative relationships with parents.

After listening to Daniela and Irene's responses, Ginger seemed anxious to speak. She explained that she thought her response should also follow Irene's because it also addressed the subject of time. Interestingly, however, Ginger's perspective on the need for time in teaching presented a very different view of teacher knowledge. She offered the following response,

Perfect. Cause mine goes with that. I was just— I was thinking the same thing about time. And what do teachers need. What do teachers need? To never sleep maybe? And then to have none of their colleagues ever sleep? So that you can always be working. Cause I'm pretty sure that I could start in three minutes and I could work until I'm, I dunno, I'm sixty five and I wouldn't be done. Like I feel like there is so much to learn, and so much that can be done, that there's just— I'm already stressed that, oh my god, I only have another forty years in this career. Like, what? That's not enough time! And I've done a lot of reading. I'm in this Teaching Fellow program, so I get to spend a lot of time talking and thinking about the standards and thinking about policies. And, that's a whole, that's like a whole 'nother conversation. And then the, you know, the reasons they're in place. But one of the things I'm really interested in— I am a numbers person, in the sense that I like research. I like the idea that we've learned so much and the— you know these things that we (*gesturing around the table*) may naturally do. That the fact that you say, you know, it doesn't have to be a number. You know, kids read when they read, they read cause they want to read. The reason it gets quantified and put in a number

is because there are people who don't get that. And so the research that we're able to do— It's like, ok, this is what you need to do to get a child to read. We may do it inherently. Others don't. And so I was sitting in class and I was reading this book on dyslexia. And this one part we all kind of just, like, put our books down. Like, "Oh, shit." Because the statistic was, between K and 2, the brain is still being wired. Nothing is solidified. You know lots of, you know, neurons are still getting formed. If a student is struggling with language. You know, language processing. Thirty minutes. Thirty to forty minutes of really basic but direct instruction. Phonics. Phonemes. You know, practice, practice, practice. Forty minutes a day. That student will be reading on grade level by the time they're in second grade. Gets into third grade. So like eight. So between seven and eight. Your neurons are starting to harden. It goes from thirty to forty minutes a day to two hours a day. Two hours a day! And so I was sitting in class and that's when we all, like, put down our books. And I was like, "I need to go! To the classroom! Like right now! I need to call families right now. Because I only have. Oh my god. K to 2. Holy crap. I need to start right now. I don't have enough time. All these kids that I, I can see. And I don't want them to end up in fifth grade still reading at a first grade level. I have to catch them now. I have to catch them now." And that, in itself, is, like, great. The more we know, the more we research, that's wonderful. But the more we know the less time we have. I just— Everything else. Every time I read a new article or I learn something else I think I don't know— How is there enough time for me to save everyone? There's so much now that we can know, but there just isn't time. So— And there's no, I mean, no policy in the world can add hours to the day. Or slow down how fast a kid grows up. So I don't think anyone could actually give us that. (Interview transcript)

Though she began her response by drawing a connection between Irene's argument and her own, Ginger's response appeared to depart substantially from the first two speakers' ideas about what teaching is and what counts as teacher knowledge. First, she characterized teaching as the act of a solitary savior, a job that requires her and her colleagues to toil endlessly, year after year, even without sleep. Her perspective and the strong emotion and anxiety embedded in it recalled her story about working with the Albanian family, where collaboration with the family did not occur to her as an option. Rather than finding support, expertise, or respite in working collaboratively with families, Ginger endowed educational research with the power to contain all the knowledge she needed to be able to be successful in her work with children. She seemed to believe that implementing the recommendations of research, in this case down to the minute, would be the only formula that would guarantee success in her work with students. Absent from her response is any faith in her own knowledge of the children she works with or any interest in the opportunity to learn from families by fostering collaborative relationships with them. Her only reference toward families here is limited to the urgent need to call them and exhort them help her adhere to the recommendations of research. Yet ultimately, lacking the ability to add hours to the day, Ginger felt doomed to failure.

Immediately following Ginger, Estelle shared a distinctly different view on the role of the teacher, particularly as it pertained to her work with families. She rejoined,

I actually want to speak to this idea of structures. Or the lack thereof, is what I heard. I think we're living in a time now, where everything can actually, or the belief is instructionally, everything can be fixed with the appropriate structure. You just have to collect the right data. Make the right assessment determination. Match that with the child's needs. Whether it's a DRA. *(slight laugh)* Some reading program. TERC. Maybe

not TERC. You know, another math program. A kit. An online, you know, game. And everything will be fixed. It doesn't matter that they're first grade– in fifth grade and reading at first grade level. Doesn't matter if they're not quite reading at kindergarten. Doesn't matter. It's totally fixable. It's totally fixable. And now what I heard in our stories was no pre-planned structure. There was no, you know, no one had a plan, necessarily. We were all kind of experimenting or trying out things that we felt in our gut or in just our experience might potentially work. But there were no real– there was no way to know, that you could, that it was going to work, you know, as Daniela said. So for me maybe there are things in education that with the right kind of structures in place, you can fix. You know? Or you can make work if they're not working. I don't think it's everything, though. And I think when we're talking about working with families and children, you can have as many structures as you want to, but again, that's the immeasurable. And that's the area where you cannot have specific structures to meet the vast, individualized, you know, nature of families. And then the individuals within them that we encounter every single day. So I wanna say, that in this time where I feel like there isn't a lot of flexibility with structures. I'd like some flexibility around the way that I work with families. I don't want somebody coming in and telling me, what I need to do. I don't want them coming in and telling me how often I need to report. That does not serve everybody's purposes. And if parents can't read the reports anyway, it's not working! That's a structure that has been failed. So maybe when it comes to families. Even if it's reporting about your child's progress, it's about the conversation that you're having and the child sitting on your lap and the con– the exchange and not so much about the paperwork. That's not gonna work there. (Interview transcript)

In Estelle's response she gently and thoughtfully offered a rebuttal to Ginger's view. As the first teacher to speak directly to the question of work with families, Estelle built her argument on the wisdom gathered collectively in the teachers' recollections of their work. In her analysis, she confirmed my belief that teachers may work best when they can be trusted to bring the depth of their knowledge, of children, of families, and of teaching, to their practice. When Estelle opined, "We were all kind of experimenting or trying out things that we felt in our gut or in just our experience might potentially work," she suggested that teachers must be understood as embodied practitioners, who develop and refine their practice based on the perspective they glean from the lives they have lived. When we prescribe the process of teaching, through standardization of curriculum and pedagogy, we are asking teachers to lay down the most valuable tool they have in their tool belt: their own ability to perceive, to interpret, and to act on the knowledge that comes from that active process of sense making.

Supporting the development of teachers as embodied practitioners

How can an understanding of teachers as embodied practitioners, capable of using their skills of observation and description to take a descriptive stance, inform the field of teacher preparation and ongoing professional development? If teachers bring the perspective of the lives they have lived to their work, how can we support them in building from their strengths and give them experiences that help them to work through their limitations and challenges. I believe that teacher education programs must offer future and current teachers opportunities to reflect on their own biographies as a means to understanding how their life experiences have shaped their views on children, families, and teaching. This process would help teachers to articulate and recognize the subjective perspective they bring to their work. Guiding teachers to examine their

own beliefs and biases would help them to be vigilant in acknowledging the limits of their perspective, especially when working with families whose culture and values are different from their own. Further, I recommend that teacher education programs and schools adopt a practice of developing teachers' capacity to take a descriptive stance toward children and families. Seeing children and families descriptively rather than judgmentally may require the development of a dormant muscle. Offering courses and professional development that strengthen teachers to think empirically and describe without judgment, would develop teachers' capacity for the generativity of the descriptive stance. This two pronged approach, helping teachers to be reflective about their biographies while developing their capacity to take a descriptive stance, would need to be situated within a program that emphasized a culturally responsive approach to teaching and learning.

It is with sad resignation that I recognize that in the current educational climate, none of these recommendations may ever be considered worthwhile by those in power to influence our approach to teacher training. During his tenure as Commissioner of the New York State Department of Education, David Steiner expressed great pride at the success he had at revamping the process for teacher certification to include "non-schools of education" (Hess, 2011). In the next two years, new requirements are being rolled out for teachers applying for certification. Corporations such as Pearson have been given an expanded role in evaluating teachers' competence to teach. Beginning in 2014 prospective teachers will need to submit video taped excerpts of their work in student teaching to be reviewed through Pearson's Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) program (M. Munn, personal communication, 11/29/12). These ten minute extracts, disembodied from the larger context in which the teacher works will be evaluated off-site by "experts" who have no relationship to the prospective teacher to

determine the worthiness of their application to be certified. Just as teachers are no longer trusted to assess whether or not their students are learning, it seems that professors in schools of education are no longer trusted to assess whether or not their students are competent to teach. As evaluation of children and teachers is increasingly outsourced to profit driven corporations, judgments about what makes a good teacher and what makes for good teacher preparation, will increasingly be determined by the cost effectiveness of their method. Driven by this bottom line mentality, teacher preparation programs that produce teachers that can improve children's test scores will be considered worthwhile. Teacher preparation programs that strive to do anything else may be considered antiquated and irrelevant. In this oppressive and reductive environment, there may be little hope for implementing the kinds of recommendations I suggest above. However, I refuse to let the current conditions prevent me from asserting what I believe to be important in how we develop teachers' capacity to work with children and families.

Teachers and families: a powerful alliance

Finally, I believe that teachers must be recognized for the role they have to play in advocating for what they know is right for children and families. The current discourse in education reform has been tragically teacher proofed. Too many decisions, decisions that have a direct effect on the lives of teachers, children, and families, are being made by those who have very little knowledge of the daily experience of living in schools. Teachers' voices and teachers knowledge must be considered as these debates rage on. Unfortunately, when teachers do enter the conversation they are often accused of self-interest, portrayed in popular media by such films as *Waiting for "Superman"* (Chilcott & Guggenheim, 2010) as advocating selfishly for their own needs while they ignore the needs of children. For teachers' voices to be heard they must be

joined by the voices of families. Ironically, teachers working today may feel to oppressed by the ceaseless pressures on their lives and work to have any energy left to develop collaborative relationships with families. In the end, however, these partnerships may help amplify their voices such that teachers can no longer be silenced from the discourse on teaching.

Afterthoughts

A number of years ago I participated in a day-long conference primarily attended by teacher education students at Long Island University. Beth Harry was the keynote speaker and she eloquently described her research (Harry, Klingner & Cramer, 2007; Harry & Klingner, 2006), which addressed questions of how and why children of color were being disproportionately referred for special education services. In her work, Harry explored how teachers' biases and limitations in their perceptions of children and families (biases and limitations formed, by the way, through the experiences of their life and professional histories) resulted in the inequitable process of misdiagnosing children of color disproportionately. At the end of her talk, Harry took questions from the audience. A graduate student currently working as a public school teacher raised her hand and, with despair in her voice, asked Harry what role she could possibly play in reversing this disturbing trend. Harry recommended with humor and sincerity, "Stay out of the teachers lounge." Once the laughter subsided, Harry elaborated on the ways that teachers' lounges can be toxic places. Though they do not have to be, some teachers' lounges can become sites where teachers, weary of the many challenges of their jobs, trade in judgments and misperceptions of children and their families. For confirmation of Harry's admonition, even in the relatively enlightened environment of Cedar, we need look no further than Irene's story of her work with Cynthia and her mother. The toxicity of the teachers' lounge

is not located in any particular place but takes root any place where teachers have lost the ability to think and speak generatively about their work with children and their families. It is my hope when teachers are able to feel recognized and supported as embodied practitioners the discourse of the teachers lounge, wherever it occurs, may be elevated in ways that support teachers in the challenging but rewarding task of fostering genuine and collaborative relationships with families.

Appendix A • Teacher Questionnaire

Greetings!

My name is Kirsten Cole and I am a doctoral student at the CUNY Graduate Center in the Urban Education Program. For my dissertation research I plan to collect teachers' life histories with a focus on understanding how teachers' life and professional experiences shape their approach to working with families.

I am seeking a small sample of teachers from Cedar to participate in my study. I am hoping to have a cross sample of teachers from the school who are at a variety of points in their careers.

Participants will receive a \$100 GIFT CARD (amex/visa or the store of your choice) for participating. I am asking for your help in two ways:

- First, please complete this brief survey so that I can gather some basic information about the teaching staff at Cedar.
- Second, please indicate whether or not you would be willing to consider participation in my research as a teacher in my sample. Participation would involve making yourself available in three ways:
 - Two to three interviews of 1-2 hours each, scheduled at your convenience over the 2010-2011 school year.
 - A couple of classroom observations (OPTIONAL.)
 - Participation in one to two Descriptive Reviews of Practice focusing on the question of how we work with families, scheduled over the 2010-2011 school year. (OPTIONAL)

If you have any questions about this survey or your possible participation in my study please feel free to contact me at 917-279-2224 or kcole@gc.cuny.edu. Thanks in advance for your help.

Kirsten

.....

If you would be willing to have me contact you for more information about my research and to discuss the possibility of participating in my study please fill in your contact information below.

Name:

Email:

Phone:

SURVEY OF CEDAR TEACHERS

Please type an X in all boxes that apply to indicate your answers.

	1-5 years	5-10 years	10 + years
How many years (total) have you been a teacher?			
How many years have you been teaching at Cedar?			

What language[s] do you speak? <i>Please fill in as many as are applicable and indicate your level of fluency.</i>	Basic	Proficient
English		
Spanish		
Other: _____		
Other: _____		

How do you identify yourself by race/ethnicity? <i>Please check all that apply.</i>	
American Indian or Alaska Native	
Black or African American	
Hispanic or Latino	
Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	
White	

	Yes	No		
Are you a parent, step-parent or guardian to a child or children?				
What are your child[ren]'s ages? <i>Please check all that apply.</i>				
	Infant – Preschool	Elementary School	Middle & H.S.	Adult

Thanks so much for responding to this survey!

Appendix B • First Individual Interview Protocol

Life History Interview Protocol

(Excerpted from *The Life Story Interview*, Dan McAdams, 1995)

I begin by clarifying that in the first interview that I'm not looking for information specifically about teaching.

Introduction: Life Chapters

I would like you to begin by thinking about your life as a story. All stories have characters, scenes, plots, and so forth. There are high points and low points in the story, good times and bad times, heroes and villains, and so on. A long story may even have chapters. Think about your life story as having at least a few different chapters. What might those chapters be? I would like you to describe for me each of the main chapters of your life story. You may have as many or as few chapters as you like, but I would suggest dividing your story into at least 2 or 3 chapters and at most about 7. If you can, give each chapter a name and describe briefly the overall contents in each chapter. As a storyteller here, think of yourself as giving a plot summary for each chapter. This first part of the interview can expand forever, so I would like you to keep it relatively brief, say, within 20-25 minutes. Therefore, you don't want to tell me "the whole story" now. Just give me a sense of the story's outline -- the major chapters in your life.

(Give 5-10 minutes to jot down some notes.)

Critical Events

Now that you have given us an outline of the chapters in your story, I would like you to concentrate on a few key events that may stand out in bold print in the story. A key event should be a specific happening, a critical incident, a significant episode in your past set in a particular time and place. It is helpful to think of such an event as constituting a specific moment in your life story which stands out for some reason. Thus, a particular conversation you may have had with your mother when you were 12-years-old or a particular decision you made one afternoon last summer might qualify as a key event in your life story. These are particular moments set in a particular time and place, complete with particular characters, actions, thoughts, and feelings. An entire summer vacation -- be it very happy or very sad or very important in some way -- or a very difficult year in high school, on the other hand, would not qualify as key events because these take place over an extended period of time. (They are more like life chapters.)

I am going to ask you about 8 specific life events. For each event, describe in detail what happened, where you were, who was involved, what you did, and what you were thinking and feeling in the event. Also, try to convey what impact this key event has had in your life story and what this event says about who you are or were as a person. Please be very specific here.

Before we begin, do you have any questions?

Event #1: Peak Experience

A peak experience would be a high point in your life story -- perhaps the high point. It would be a moment or episode in the story in which you experienced extremely positive emotions, like joy, excitement, great happiness, uplifting, or even deep inner peace. Today, the episode would stand out in your memory as one of the best, highest, most wonderful scenes or moments in your life story. Please describe in some detail a peak experience, or something like it, that you have experienced some time in your past. Tell me exactly what happened, where it happened, who was involved, what you did, what you were thinking and feeling, **what impact this experience may have had upon you, and what this experience says about who you were or who you are.**

Event #2: Nadir Experience

A "nadir" is a low point. A nadir experience, therefore, is the opposite of a peak experience. It is a low point in your life story. Thinking back over your life, try to remember a specific experience in which you felt extremely negative emotions, such as despair, disillusionment, terror, guilt, etc. You should consider this experience to represent one of the "low points" in your life story. Even though this memory is unpleasant, I would still appreciate an attempt on your part to be as honest and detailed as you can be. Please remember to be specific. What happened? When? Who was involved? What did you do? What were you thinking and feeling? **What impact has the event had on you? What does the event say about who you are or who you were?**

Event #3: Turning Point

In looking back on one's life, it is often possible to identify certain key "turning points" -- episodes through which a person undergoes substantial change. Turning points can occur in many different spheres of a person's life -- in relationships with other people, in work and school, in outside interests, etc. I am especially interested in a turning point in your understanding of yourself. [Please identify a particular episode in your life story that you now see as a turning point. If you feel that your life story contains no turning points, then describe a particular episode in your life that comes closer than any other to qualifying as a turning point.]

Event #4: Earliest Memory

Think back now to your childhood, as far back as you can go. Please choose a relatively clear memory from your earliest years and describe it in some detail. The memory need not seem especially significant in your life today. Rather what makes it significant is that it is the first or one of the first memories you have, one of the first scenes in your life story. The memory should be detailed enough to qualify as an "event." This is to say that you should choose the earliest (childhood) memory for which you are able to identify what happened, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling. Give us the best guess of your age at the time of the event.

Event #5: Important Childhood Scene

Now describe another memory from childhood, from later childhood, that stands out in your mind as especially important or significant. It may be a positive or negative memory. What happened? Who was involved? What did you do? What were you thinking and feeling? **What impact has the event had on you? What does it say about who you are or who you were? Why is it important?**

Event #6: Important Adolescent Scene

Describe a specific event from your teen-aged years that stands out as being especially important or significant. **What impact has the event had on you? What does it say about who you are or who you were? Why is it important?**

Event #7: Important Adult Scene

Describe a specific event from your adult years (age 21 and beyond) that stands out as being especially important or significant. **What impact has the event had on you? What does it say about who you are or who you were? Why is it important?**

Event #8: One Other Important Scene

Describe one more event, from any point in your life, that stands out in your memory as being especially important or significant. **What impact has the event had on you? What does it say about who you are or who you were? Why is it important?**

Appendix C • Second Individual Interview Protocol

Introduction:

With this interview I want to learn a little more about **your educational experiences**, both as a student and a teacher. I'm hoping to have a better understanding of **your relationships to school, to parents and your thinking about your teaching**. I'll start with some very general questions and then you can just go from there. I may follow up with specific questions that respond to some of what you're telling me.

When you were growing up, what stories did your family tell about **their own** school experiences?

Tell me about the school(s) you attended growing up. What are your memories of the school?

Optional follow ups:

1. What teachers do you remember and why? (connected and disconnected)
2. What did your parents think about your teachers?

Tell me about the school you teach at now. What rituals/events/anecdotes stand out as exemplifying your school?

Tell me about some experiences you've had working with families.

Optional follow ups:

1. Positive experience working with families.
2. Negative experience working with families.

What do you envision for the future of your teaching? What are your big plans, hopes and dreams?

Appendix D • Group Discussion Guidelines

Note, these guidelines were distributed to the teachers by email one week prior to meeting.

Recollection of work with families

To start, make a list of experiences you have had working with families that really stand out. They can be wholly positive experiences, highly challenging experiences, somewhere in between, or relationships that evolved over the course of time. Spend a few minutes generating this list.

For your recollection, select one of the experiences from your list and prepare to describe it. Select the one that is most interesting to you or stands out to you at this time. It need not be the most “important” or impactful interaction, just one that speaks to you in this moment. Remember that you will be sharing this recollection with the group assembled so choose a recollection that you feel comfortable talking about publicly. Additionally, keep in mind that I will be recording our conversation for use in my dissertation, though your identity will be kept anonymous in all my work with this data.

Once you have chosen your recollection, spend about **15 minutes** making notes about the following:

- Set the context. Where were you working? When did this take place? What, if any, aspects of the larger educational climate created a context for this experience?
- Who was involved? Use descriptive language to introduce us to the family and their child. Describe where you were as a teacher in that moment. Were there other people involved? Describe any colleagues or other members of the community who contributed to your work with this family.
- Share some key incidents or interactions in your work with this family. Use specific description to take us to some moments in time in your work with them.
- How did you feel over the course of these interactions? How did your emotions color your interactions? Recalling it now, how do you feel about the relationship?
- Finally, reflect on how these experiences shape your approach to working with other families. Going forward, how did/does this relationship inform your teaching?

Be prepared to share your recollection with the group for about **6-8 minutes**. Use this time to set a context, tell a story and give the group a vivid sense of the relationship you describe. As we gather these recollections we be working together to expand our sense of how we work with families, so that our collective knowledge is richer and more complex than when we began.

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