Ed. 17
pp. xiii – xxx

The ESSENTIAL CONVERSATION

What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot

BALLANTINE BOOKS
NEW YORK

Featherstone, Linda Mason, Pat Graham, Michelle Pierce, Randy Testa, Bill Wallace, and Marti Wilson.

It is because of my children—Tolani and Martin David—that I felt compelled to write this book. I wanted to revisit—once more with feeling—the amazing journey I took with them through school, a journey of love and loyalty, a journey that continues and evolves, and circles back home. I thank them for their patience with my missteps and for the lessons they taught me along the way about humility, resilience, and mercy. My mother, Margaret Morgan Lawrence, was my first teacher; her grit and grace, truth-telling and restraint, I have tried to memorize in mothering my own children. I am deeply grateful for the generational echoes that nourish and guide me. All of my family, my sister and brother, their partners, and their progeny have woven their vivid and poignant stories into this essential conversation. From the beginning, my man, Irving Hamer, cheered me on, raised penetrating questions, and challenged me to amplify my voice. This family-school terrain is one he knows very well, and his intelligence and wisdom—generously and lovingly given—enriched the work.

Ike Williams, my savvy agent, believed in this book from the start. His sage counsel and strategic advocacy were a great support. Jonathan Karp, editor extraordinaire, was spare and incisive in his guidance and perfect in his timing. He knew when to pursue and when to retreat. Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to the Spencer Foundation for its generous support of this project and for its commitment to nourishing the work of researchers and educators who are building the bridges between theory and practice.

INTRODUCTION

Inheritances

WHEN I WAS seven years old and in second grade at a rural two-room schoolhouse in apple-orchard country northwest of New York City, I contracted an exotic disease called Sydenham's chorea. It was difficult to diagnose and rare in young children; the doctors allowed me to be treated at home—rather than in the hospital—only because they trusted that my physician mother would care for me with the double dose of a doctor's judgment and a mother's love. For three months I stayed home in bed, trying to conquer the subtle infirmities of this illness, which expressed itself in the physical symptoms of weakness and dizziness and in the emotional signs of anxiety and depression. I was nursed by my maternal grandmother, a former schoolteacher, who brought me trays of food and worked with me on my "lessons." My grandmother's home schooling in those three months was more strict and demanding than any curriculum that I have had before or since. My friends were allowed to visit very occasionally, but only if they promised to stay only for a few minutes and be very quiet. For a while, I enjoyed all of the attention—my parents' solicitousness, my siblings' anxious concern. But very soon the sedentary, quiet life got old. I missed my friends. I missed the group life at school, the hustle and bustle, the scheming and competing, the rules, routines, and public rewards for work well done. And I worried a lot about whether I

would lose my place socially and academically. Slowly but surely, I recovered and returned to Mrs. Sullivan's classroom, first for half days and then, weeks later, for the whole day.

One afternoon, when my parents came to pick me up early, Mrs. Sullivan walked outside with me to await their arrival, a gesture that made me feel immediately important and anxious. I remember her hard hand on my shoulder as she steered me down the stairs. I recall the way she kept clearing her throat nervously as my parents unfolded themselves from the car and made their way toward us. Her greeting was strictly ceremonial. She moved quickly to her main point. She wanted my parents to know that my three-month absence had severely compromised my academic progress. She did not think there was any way I could make up for lost time; it would, therefore, be necessary for me to repeat second grade. But that wasn't the worst of what Mrs. Sullivan had to say. She also thought that my parents had to face the fact that I "might, just might not be college material." All of this was said in front of me (actually far above my head, so I had to strain my neck to look up at her face); her voice was stern and hard, her expression flat.

I couldn't believe my ears. My heart was pounding hard against my chest. This was shocking news, so unfair, so wrongheaded. I am sure that my parents felt the same way. But what I remember most from this story was not Mrs. Sullivan's wounding words, nor the knot in my belly as I heard them. The most vivid and lasting image was my parents' response, a reaction that lacked all of the clarity and courage that I was used to seeing from them. At that moment, they were not their usual strong selves, fiercely advocating for me. They were like I had never seen them before, tentative and awkward. They listened, demurred but didn't disagree, and made a quick exit.

All the way home I waited for their outrage, waited for their defense of me. Instead, they were silent, probably biding their time until they could find some private moments together in which to confer and come up with an appropriate collective response. By dinnertime, they had emerged from my father's study, their expressions upbeat, their outlook optimistic. They were saying that they knew I was very intelligent, capable of being a great student, and certainly capable of

going to college and beyond. They knew that Mrs. Sullivan was wrong and the best way to prove her wrong was for me to do excellent work. I was not to succumb to her prophecy. I was to challenge it with the best I had. Of course, I rose to my parents' challenge, worked very hard, exceeded all of Mrs. Sullivan's expectations, and joined my classmates in third grade the next year.

My parents' primary message to me—a litany that they would repeat at crucial moments throughout my life—was that I was strong and resilient; that I could do anything I set my mind to; that I could even overcome prejudice, malice, and stupidity with good works. But the other, more surprising message I received from watching this encounter between them and Mrs. Sullivan was that school was a place—perhaps the only place—where my parents seemed off-balance and reluctant; where their activist instincts didn't serve them well; where it was hard for them to figure out the best way to protect and advocate for their daughter. Many years later, when I was trying to figure out how to protect my own daughter from what I perceived to be a teacher's subtle abuse, I remember my mother telling me that I should not do anything that would make the teacher feel angry or afraid, for that was sure to endanger my daughter in her classroom. At that moment, my mind raced back thirty-five years to that afternoon with Mrs. Sullivan. "I still feel guilty for not having done more to protect you from her," whispered my mother as our memories converged and our minds raced back to 1952.

None of this earlier uncertainty and tentativeness was there several years later, when my father responded quickly and decisively to my eighth-grade history teacher's rendering of an American story about which he was expert and cared deeply. (My father was a professor of sociology whose scholarship included research and writing on the history of black activism in the South.) In my eighth-grade citizenship education class, Miss Rogers—her pale face caked with powder, her eyebrows drawn on with black pencil, wisps of white hair escaping from under her red wig—taught us that Abraham Lincoln led the country in the "War Between the States" and that the battle had nothing to do with slavery. Her eyes rested on me—the only Negro child in the class—daring me to challenge her interpretation of history.

That evening around the dinner table my parents made the correction. It was "the Civil War" and the institution of slavery was at its very center. I will never forget my father's rage at discovering the word *barbarian* used to describe the Mayans of Central America in my social studies book. He could not resist lecturing his children on the "extraordinary" Mayan civilization—its creativity, organization, and resilience—and then immediately sat down at his typewriter to bang out a restrained but angry letter to my teacher.

Watching this scene, repeated many times over throughout my schooling, I observed the sharp dissonance of values between my home and my school. My parents' home curriculum was purposeful and subversive, often oppositional to what our teachers were preaching. When the infractions were minor—merely a matter of interpretation or honest error—then my parents would quietly make the corrections at home. They picked their battles very carefully. But when our teachers said something that my parents considered blatantly misleading or hurtful to their children, especially when they considered the message to be harmful to all of the children in the class, they would speak up. Since I knew my parents well and knew the things they cared about—peace, justice, fairness, dignity—I would occasionally hide my teachers' ignorance and prejudice from them. As an adolescent I did not always welcome their challenge and their activism on my behalf. By junior high school, when I was determined to define my independence, the fire and fury I had hoped for from them in second grade felt intrusive.

By the time my brother, my sister, and I reached high school, my parents had started an annual tradition of inviting all of our teachers and their spouses to our house for a gala end-of-the-year dinner party. Since there were three of us, with about eight teachers apiece (including coaches and guidance counselors), these were huge events. My father would make his famous strawberry champagne punch, my mother would bake her delicious apple pies, and they would both collaborate on the sumptuous meal. Every year we kids would beg our parents not to give this party. We hated the idea of seeing our teachers in our own living room, smoking and drinking and carrying on. We thought our parents were being overly generous by allowing them

to cross the threshold into the intimate space of our home. But my parents were insistent, and the party was always a big success. The teachers loved the treat and the recognition (my father would always stand and offer an elegant toast at the end of the evening), and they loved being fed. For me the actual event was always easier than the anticipation of it. My teachers always seemed more human and more playful than I ever experienced them to be in class.

Looking back on the various ways my parents negotiated these family-school boundaries, it is important to recognize how atypical they were. Unlike the great majority of parents, my folks were present at all of the school events, were familiar with each child's curriculum, and made an effort to get to know the teachers. They were vigilant in their watchfulness, fully engaged, and prepared to act. But they were highly unusual in these respects. (I am sure they felt the necessity to keep a special vigilance helping their "token" black children navigate in a white world that was often unfriendly.) In those days, most parents in our community never even appeared at school. They were not made to feel welcome, and were summoned to the school only when their children were flunking their subjects or behaving badly. Except for a perfunctory open house at the beginning of the year, the school did everything to seal its boundaries and keep parents out.

The three parent-teacher scenes imprinted in my childhood memory underscore the complexity and uncertainty, the anxiety and the vulnerability, that came with the territory, all of which I absorbed as a child and incorporated as an adult. I watched the ways in which my strong, courageous parents became uncertain and tentative as they tried to protect me from the teacher's biased vision, and I heard the guilt that followed when they felt that they had not done enough. I saw the ways in which they raised their voices with clarity and courage when they worried that their child and her classmates were being corrupted by false or prejudicial information. And I saw my parents respond to their children's teachers' hunger for appreciation and support by throwing a big party to celebrate their work.

When my own two children became school-aged and I found myself participating in parent-teacher encounters, I—like most parents—felt the imprint of my early experiences as a child. Sitting in the tiny

kindergarten chair, facing my daughter's teacher, I was drawn back in time, immediately made to feel small, powerless, and infantilized. But because I had spent a good deal of my own childhood watching my parents cross the family-school boundaries, I would also hear the echoes of my parents' voices. I would feel the confusing mix of tentativeness, passivity, the urge to protect, and the guilt that followed when I had not effectively advocated for my child. At other times, I would feel compelled to speak out and confront the teacher who I thought was neglecting or injuring my child. I would risk severing the fragile relationship that I had established with the teacher—risk the backlash that might befall my child—in order to fight for what I thought was right or fair. At still other times, I would feel my parents' impulse to celebrate the teachers' work, to feed their hunger for recognition and reward, not by throwing parties as my parents did, but by plying them with letters and gifts of appreciation.

What is fascinating about my experience relating to my own children's teachers is that my own hard-earned wisdom as an educator and social scientist concerned about these matters did not prepare me for the depth of emotion and drama I felt in parent conferences. It did not prepare me for the subtle institutional barriers that made me feel strangely unwelcome in my children's school—as if I were trespassing on foreign ground—even when the stated policies promoted welcome and openness. It did not prepare me for the terror I experienced anticipating my meetings with teachers, the uncertainty and awkwardness that kept me off balance during the conference, and the inevitable inadequacy and guilt I felt afterward as I reflected on and rehearsed what I had heard and said. It did not prepare me for the way in which these tiny scenes of parent-teacher dialogue seemed to play out the larger social and cultural issues in our society.

It was not unusual for me to stew for days afterward about the parent-teacher conferences that I attended. Even meetings that were full of a teacher's praise and admiration for my child were always marred in some way by a gesture, inflection, or word that would linger as a worry in my mind. In the aftermath of these meetings, I would often take pen to paper and write a letter to the teacher, offering an additional perspective, correcting my faux pas, urging greater candor, or,

occasionally, drawing a clearer boundary for a future meeting. These were labored letters. I chose my words very carefully and edited endlessly, trying to capture a tone that would not sever my connection with the teacher or make it worse for my child, as I tried to find the delicate balance between defending my child and supporting the teacher. Scores of these letters fill my files (some actually mailed, others never sent); the following is one typical example. It is a letter sent to my son Martin's second-grade teacher. It has the ghost of Mrs. Sullivan, my own second-grade teacher, written all over it.

11/12/93

Dear Richard,

I left our parent-teacher conference with a heavy heart, feeling somewhat overwhelmed by the discouraging tone we concluded on. It seemed to me that by the end of our meeting, the view of Martin David had been clouded by an emphasis on his vulnerabilities, his trouble with "timing" in class discussions, his difficulties fitting in to the social scene on the playground at recess (a scene we both admitted is often tough and unforgiving for any child). I am sure that all of these concerns are valid; they certainly struck me as authentic descriptions of Martin. But after several days of feeling haunted by the tone of our conference (particularly the second half, with its focus on the challenges), I have felt the need to write to you . . . as a mother wanting to redraw a fuller portrait of Martin.

First, I want to say that I feel deeply thankful for the thorough and perceptive picture you gave me of Martin in the second grade. Your insights are wonderful, even though they are laced with car metaphors (smile)! And I feel thankful for the time and care you devoted to our conference.

Second, I am *very* encouraged by what I see as wonderful progress that Martin has made since September: by his strong, capable reading; by his journal writing; by his increasingly developed small-motor skills; by his wonderful spelling tests; by his steady progress with Laurie in his math tutorial; by his

bright, smiling self-portrait; and above all, by his unflagging diligence in his schoolwork.

Third, I am pleased by what I see as his increasing willingness to express his emotions, to tell how he is feeling, to reveal his well-developed humor, and to be comfortable enough in your classroom that smiles and laughter sometimes spill out.

All of these signs are good and heartening and reflect, I think, both Martin's determination and competence and your extraordinary devotion and skill as a teacher. Let us not lose sight of this wonderful momentum Martin David has shown even as we speak candidly and clearly about those issues that continue to deserve our concern and keen attention.

Thanks for listening,
Sara

Often feeling utterly alone as I faced the teacher in parent conferences and then lived with the aftermath of unfinished business that was sure to follow, I always suspected that other parents were experiencing some version of my anguish, but that they too were struggling alone and making it up as they went along. There were no rituals or arenas—inside or outside of schools—where parents could come together for mutual support, for information sharing, for strategizing, or for catharsis. As a matter of fact, the opposite seemed to be true. Parents tended to be secretive and furtive about their worries. They were reluctant to admit to the preoccupation and anguish that somehow seemed inappropriate, and hesitant to reveal any information that might reduce their child's competitive advantage. But it was not only parents who felt isolated and vulnerable. I could also tell that teachers had their own deep concerns, their own sense of exposure and vulnerability. And I knew that most of them had not been adequately prepared in their professional training programs to build relationships with families as a central part of their work, nor were they getting support or guidance from their administrators and colleagues. This was a tough scene for teachers as well.

Everyone believes that parents and teachers should be allies and

partners. After all, they are both engaged in the important and precious work of raising, guiding, and teaching our children. But more often than not, parents and teachers feel estranged from and suspicious of each other. Their relationship tends to be competitive and adversarial rather than collaborative and empathic. Their encounters feel embattled rather than peaceful and productive. This relational enmity—most vividly ritualized and dramatized in the parent-teacher conference—reflects a territorial warfare, a clash of cultures between the two primary arenas of acculturation in our society. This book will explore the microcosm of parent-teacher conferences as a way of revealing and illuminating the macrocosm of institutional and cultural forces that define family-school relationships and shape the socialization of our children.

To parents, their child is the most important person in their lives, the one who arouses their deepest passions and greatest vulnerabilities, the one who inspires their fiercest advocacy and protection. And it is teachers—society's professional adults—who are the primary people with whom the parents must seek alliance and support in the crucial work of child rearing. They must quickly learn to release their child and trust that he or she will be well cared for by a perfect stranger whose role as teacher gives her access to the most intimate territory, the deepest emotional places. Their productive engagement with the teacher is essential for the child's learning and growth, and for the parents' peace of mind. All of these expectations and fears get loaded on to encounters between parents and teachers.

I believe that for parents there is no more dreaded moment, no arena where they feel more exposed than at the ritual conferences that are typically scheduled twice a year—once in the fall and once in the spring—in schools. Although it may not be quite as emotionally loaded for teachers, it is also the arena in which they feel most uncertain, exposed, and defensive, and the place where they feel their competence and their professionalism most directly challenged. Beneath the polite surface of parent-teacher conferences, then, burns a cauldron of fiery feelings made particularly difficult because everyone carefully masks them and they seem inappropriate for the occasion.

This book will focus specifically on the parent-teacher conference,

the ritual encounter in which the dynamics of this complex relationship get vividly, and dramatically, played out. In this ritual, so friendly and benign in its apparent goals, parents and teachers are racked with high anxiety. In this scene marked by decorum, politeness, and symbolism, they exhibit gestures of wariness and defensiveness. In this dialogue where the conversation appears to be focused on the child, adults often play out their own childhood histories, their own insecurities, and their own primal fears. In this encounter where the content seems to be defined by individual stories, there is embedded a broader cultural narrative.

Parent-teacher conferences, then, are crucial events because there is so much at stake for the children who cross family-school borders, because they arouse so much anxiety and passion for the adults, and because they are the small stage on which our broader cultural priorities and values get played out. In each of these ways, this tiny, twice-yearly ritual takes on a huge significance that can be overwhelming for the participants. But the importance of parent-teacher encounters does not rest solely on these qualitative measures of passion and purpose. The sheer numbers attest to our need—as parents and as educators—to find ways of making them as productive and as meaningful as possible. And these numbers are staggering. In the United States, there are between 4 million and 4.4 million teachers teaching approximately 52 million students in grades from prekindergarten through high school. (To give you a sense of the scale and magnitude of these numbers, compare the population of teachers to two other professions—medicine and law—that offer their services to families and in which good client relationships are crucial to successful work. Approximately 598,000 physicians practice in the United States today, 200,000 of whom are in primary care as internists, pediatricians, and family practitioners. Of the 681,000 lawyers in this country, about three-quarters [roughly 510,750] regularly interact with clients through work in law firms or private practice.) If each of the approximately 4 million teachers has a minimum of two opportunities (once in the fall and once in the spring) to interact with students' parents, guardians, or other family members in parent-teacher

conferences, then there is the potential for parents and teachers to be engaged in more than 100 million conferences each school year.

Even though we estimate that the numbers are huge, it is of course impossible to know the exact number of parent-teacher conferences occurring each year. We know that some parents never cross the threshold of the school and that others do so reluctantly and rarely. But the absence of those families is counterbalanced by the large numbers of parents—particularly those of children in the early grades—who attend many more than two meetings per year. Their eager, frequent, and sometimes intrusive encounters with teachers are both formal and informal, scheduled and impromptu. For all of these powerful qualitative reasons, and based on the magnitude of these quantitative measures, it is fair to speak of the dialogue between parents and teachers as "the essential conversation."

I have long had a fascination with the theater of this essential conversation; with its substance and its symbolism; with its text and subtext; with its personal and public meanings. As a matter of fact, my first book, *Worlds Apart* (1978), explored the broad landscape of family-school relationships surrounding and shaping the parent-teacher dialogue. In its attempt to chart the historical and institutional intersections between these two primary institutions of socialization, my work was pioneering. It broke new ground. Up until that point, social scientists had looked at acculturation in families and education in schools as if these were separable, dichotomous domains in the life of a child. But I argued that families and schools are overlapping spheres of socialization, and that the successful learning and development of children depends, in part, on building productive boundaries between and bridges across them.

In the last quarter century, social scientists have become increasingly interested in documenting the complex interactions between schools and the communities they serve. Their work has ranged from conceptual and empirical to practical, from developing theoretical models to offering strategic advice. For example, there has been a great deal of conceptual interest in exploring the broad ecology of education, mapping the several institutions that socialize children,

and charting the ways in which youngsters negotiate these realms. Within this broader inquiry has been a particular interest in studying the impact of family-school dissonance on children's development and achievement, finding out what happens to students who have to make the large shifts in their language, values, and behavior when they move from their homes to their classrooms. And almost every study of school achievement has included at least a rhetorical bow to the importance of positive relationships between families and schools, even though there has been little suggestion of how these alliances might be supported and sustained.

Researchers and clinicians have also weighed in with practical advice. A large number of manuals and handbooks—primarily written for teachers—offer specific guidance about effective ways of communicating with parents, giving step-by-step prescriptions for building a comfortable alliance. But even with the increasing attention given by social scientists to negotiating the borders between families and schools, no one has focused deeply and specifically on the parent-teacher conference as microcosm or metaphor for a broader cultural narrative, as the crucible where family-school dynamics are most vividly and personally played out, and as the place where institutional relationships work or fail.

Now, after a twenty-five-year hiatus, I am interested in returning to this fertile ground for three reasons. First, I believe that the educational landscape has changed substantially, creating a different set of conditions that have powerfully reshaped and complicated the encounters between families and schools. The major changes in family structure, the rise in the number of women employed outside the home, the rapid increase in the influx of immigrant groups into our cities and schools, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the shifts in the power and preoccupations of teachers' unions, and the velocity of technological changes and increased access to cyberspace, to name a few factors, have all had an influence on redefining the roles of and relationships between families and schools. This book, then, will reflect many of these major societal shifts in the ecology of education, as well as in the experiences of parents and teachers as they adapt to these new realities.

Second, I want to shift my focus and purview from the broader structural and cultural intersections to the more intimate, personal encounters between parents and teachers. This new lens allows us to see the complexities and subtleties of the family-school drama from the protagonists' point of view; to hear the voices and views of parents and teachers, whose actions are shaped not only by the institutions they represent but also by their own histories, experiences, and temperaments. *The Essential Conversation* tells an interior story that seeks to capture the interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics between parents and teachers, searches below the polite surface of adult encounters to document the often rancorous and treacherous underbelly of real feelings, and examines what gets both revealed and masked in the highly ritualized meetings between parents and teachers.

Third, as my autobiographical reflections suggest, this book is a timely and passionate self-exploration. This is an opportunity to bring to my analysis of families and schools a different perspective, one that takes full advantage of my being a parent yet does not deny the subjective filter that invariably blurs and illuminates my view. Before I became a mother, my inquiry into the overlapping worlds of familes and schools reflected the dispassion and skepticism of a social scientist somewhat removed from the fray. To the degree that my voice was revealed in the analysis, it was a voice of balance and reason, distance and discernment. But my experience as the mother of two, who are now in their late adolescence and early adulthood, has caused a dramatic change in my perspective, in what I see and hear, in the volume and urgency in my voice, in my sense of how we must join analysis with action, interpretation with intervention. Advocating for my own children and relating to their teachers has given me new insights into how hot and passionate these interactions are, how loaded with desire, ambition, and fear, and how shaped by the idiosyncratic nature of the individual child and the particular chemistry of the adult personalities. These poignant and powerful firsthand experiences have colored and enriched my view of family-school encounters and offered me a more intimate and empathic angle of vision.

For two years I traveled around the country talking to teachers and

parents in city, suburban, and rural schools; in preschools, elementary schools, and high schools; and in public, private, and parochial schools. I wanted to capture as much variety as possible in the ways that parents and teachers come together. I wanted to see the similarities and differences in the meetings' structure and tone, to process and document the influence of such factors as the child's developmental stage, geography, demography, school funding (public or private), and institutional values (secular or sacred).

Although I spoke to dozens of teachers and parents in a broad variety of settings, the narratives that thread through this book focus on the experiences and perspectives of ten teachers—all female—I chose to talk to in depth, and some of the parents of the children in their classes. I chose to tell the stories of women teachers because the vast majority of teachers are women; it continues to be a female-dominated profession. And it is women—female teachers and mothers—who are primarily responsible for navigating the boundaries and developing the family-school relationships. I also chose to record the views and values of women teachers because both mothers and teachers (both male and female) experience a similar cultural disregard. In a society that claims to care deeply about children, where every other politician and public figure claims that education is the most important social agenda, the people whose primary responsibility it is to raise and teach the young tend to be disrespected and devalued. The dissonance between the public rhetoric that refers to "children as our most precious resource" and the reality, as reflected in how little we value those who nourish them, is deafening. How teachers and parents interpret and absorb these negative cultural views becomes a part of how they relate to one another.

I also chose to focus on teachers who are considered gifted practitioners, who are regarded as skilled, empathic, and caring in their dealings with parents. Their principals, colleagues, and parents identified them as unusual in the ways they reached out to and communicated with families; developed strategies and practices that honored parental knowledge and wisdom; and turned the largely symbolic parent-teacher conversations into meaningful, expressive exchanges. To say that the teachers who inhabit this book were good at sustaining relationships with parents that benefited their students is not to say their work was perfect or unblemished in this regard. As a matter of fact, all of them considered productive family-school encounters as central to their work but complex and difficult to navigate. Even though they enjoyed their interactions with parents and considered them crucial to their work with students, all of them regarded negotiating these relationships as the most treacherous part of their jobs. Each had one or two horror stories that still made her shudder with terror or humiliation.

I felt that it was important to describe the good but imperfect work of these teachers, because I think we—parents and teachers—can learn a lot more from examining examples of "goodness" than we can from dissecting weakness and pathology. We can also appreciate how incredibly complex and dynamic this work is by looking at people whose craft is well developed and whose self-reflective capacities are well honed. I also know from years of experience as a researcher that those people who feel relatively self-confident, both personally and professionally, are likely to be more tolerant, even welcoming, of my presence and the intrusiveness of my inquiry. And they are more likely to be undefensive and revelatory about those aspects of their work that might be regarded as problematic, weak, or underdeveloped. Their recognition of the imperfections of their efforts, and their commitment to improving their craft, are themselves sources of inspiration.

Not only was I able to interview parents and teachers—most of whom were also mothers and so could see the relationship from both sides—I also had the rare opportunity of sitting in on several parent-teacher conferences. I was able to watch the dynamics—both verbal and nonverbal—in a context of great intimacy and observe the subtle gestures that often reveal deep and surprising emotions. In fact, some of the most provocative insights came from listening for the dissonance between people's professed values and motivations and their actual behaviors and interactions, or from asking teachers and parents to offer their respective interpretations of particularly poignant moments in the dialogue.

Throughout my conversations with parents and teachers, the

gravity of my questions was usually an expression of my own personal experience and intellectual preoccupations, echoing many of the ancient themes that captured my curiosity when I witnessed the adult dance at the family-school border as a child. I pushed for depth and detail, because I was interested in exploring the layers of thinking and feeling, making the subconscious motivations conscious, tracing the points of convergence and divergence between the text and the subtext of the talk. And I wanted to move the dialogue that I had with parents and teachers from the abstract to the specific, from the conceptual to the concrete. I was always searching for the particular story that might reveal general patterns of motivation, insight, and behavior. I believe in the essential paradox of narrative work, recognizing that the closer I was able to get to the specific nuances and detail of a person's experience, the more we would be able to read it as a collective story.

Second, I was intrigued by the interplay between past and present; interested in exploring the ways in which history—both individual and institutional, psychic and cultural—gets imprinted on people's values, views, and interactions; interested in examining the intergenerational connections. I listened carefully for the ways in which early childhood narratives get recast and replayed in adults' advocacy for their own children. I was less interested in identifying and naming the objective facts of people's life experiences than in how these experiences were remembered, reinterpreted, and rehearsed over time. I wanted to know which ones survived as symbols, signs, and metaphors for understanding contemporary action.

Third, I was fascinated by the ways in which the dialogue between parents and teachers is shaped by larger cultural and historical forces. I looked for the ways in which, for example, our culture's perspectives on childhood influence the tenor and scope of the conversation between those adults primarily responsible for child-rearing; or the ways in which the broader themes of race, class, culture, and gender get negotiated. I wanted to examine how the tiny drama of parent-teacher conferences is an expression of a larger cultural narrative.

Fourth, I was interested in both the practices and paradigms of

parent-teacher encounters. That is, I wanted to learn as much as I could about the particular strategies, tools, and techniques that teachers use in working effectively with parents, and about the specific proposals and plans of action that might be instituted immediately in schools and classrooms. But I was equally engaged by trying to decipher the larger frameworks and philosophies—reflecting deep-seated values and beliefs—that shape daily practices.

Finally, I was eager to understand how parents and teachers negotiate the treacherous and tender terrain—physical, psychological, intellectual, and metaphoric—between them, a terrain that is typically uncharted, where the roles are often complex and overlapping. I was intrigued by how teachers and parents navigate these gray areas, cope with conflict and ambiguity, and manage the ambivalence—all of which challenge productive communication.

These interests in exploring the subterranean dimensions of dialogue, seeing the general in the particular, charting the intergenerational connections, documenting the philosophies and the pragmatics of productive family-school encounters, and examining the ways in which parents and teachers navigate the complex and ambiguous terrain that stretches between them brought focus to my interviews and illumination to my observations; they presaged the ways in which I hope readers will be engaged by this work.

It is my hope that this book will be a companion, a resource, and a source of inspiration, support, and challenge to readers, to parents and teachers, and to all who are interested in the fate of our children and the future of our society. I want readers to feel deeply identified with and inspired by the compassionate work of committed teachers and the passionate advocacy of parents. I want them to feel a resonance with their voices and views and to see the ways in which their insights might be incorporated and used judiciously and wisely. Although I do not believe that there is a single recipe or a set of discrete rules for constructing successful parent-teacher dialogues—one size does not fit all—I do believe that there are lessons here that delineate sound principles and good practices; that are applicable to a variety of settings and situations. Neither discrete nor prescriptive, these re-

flections and narratives are dynamic, complex, and contextual. They are parables of wisdom, combining common sense and good judgment, rich experience and discerning criticism, scholarly learning and reflective practice. The parables frame the essential conversation and offer explanation, insight, guidance, and a call to action.

THE ESSENTIAL CONVERSATION