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**Moment of Encounter: A Critical Exploration of Parent-School Communication**

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MOMENT OF ENCOUNTER: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF PARENT-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

by

Gary Samuel Marx

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
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MOMENT OF ENCOUNTER: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF PARENT-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

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Western Michigan University, 2007

Relationships among parents and schools are situated in a complex hegemony. Communication is central to the identification and construction of power in schools. Schools employ a model of communication that locates power predominately with their representatives and values parents for conformity to organizational expectations. Shared power relationships challenge actors to encounter one another and co-contribute to the development of children. The goal of this study is to uncover various meanings and understandings from what parents recall from *Moments of Encounter* with school personnel. Such an examination is designed to reveal power at the micro-level, in the encounter itself, as well as at the macro-level in exposure of the taken-for-granted ideology of schools. A thematic analysis of these in depth interviews reveals those understandings of parents – foregrounding their systems of meaning as a deconstruction of power at the micro level and revealing the hegemonic structure of power at the macro level. Further exploration is invited to more fully describe the hegemonic characteristic of schools with the long term goal of uncovering guiding principles that schools and parents can adopt as they encourage the academic and affective development of children.
DEDICATION

To Pam – My Best Friend
There are spiritual principles, or what some call human values, by which solutions can be found for every social problem. Any well-intentioned group can in a general sense devise practical solutions to its problems, but good intentions and practical knowledge are usually not enough. The essential merit of spiritual principle is that it not only presents a perspective which harmonizes with that which is immanent in human nature, it also induces an attitude, a dynamic, a will, an aspiration, which facilitate the discovery and implementation of practical measures. Leaders of government and all in authority would be well served in their efforts to solve problems if they would first seek to identify the principles involved and then be guided by them.

The Universal House of Justice, The Promise of World Peace
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I deeply thank Dr. Leigh Ford, my advisor, who nurtured me through this project and never gave up on me or on my project.

To Charles Wragg, who inspired me and taught me that all of our thoughts and actions are either constructive or destructive.

For most of my adult life, I have been a member of the Baha’i Faith and endeavored to live according to spiritual principle. One key principle of my Faith is consultation, a form of dialogic group decision making in which the participant relinquishes ownership of an idea as soon as it is presented. Then, in a spirit of unity and love, the participants consult on the merits of the idea, not on the merits of the presenter of the idea. The spirit of consultation has driven me and guided me through this project.

To my mother and father, who endured the trials of the Holocaust to establish a life in the United States and raise a family. My parents have inspired me to never give up.

To my brother, Robert Michael Marx, whose spirit is always with me.

To a better world as it emerges from the rolling up of our deeply flawed society.

Gary Samuel Marx
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

According to the most recent United States Census, in the fall of 2004, 69.2 million students were projected to be enrolled in United States schools. A small number of these students, approximately 10 million, attended private educational institutions, while the rest were enrolled in the nation’s tuition-free public institutions (http://www.census.gov/prod/2003 pubs/02stabab/statistical-abstract-02.html).

These public schools are more than simple purveyors of academic information. The Public Education Network (2004) offers the perspective that, “Public schools are community assets for learning and development, not just for children and youth, but also for residents, organizations, businesses, and other community entities. Public schools are meeting places for parents and teachers, venues for public action, centers of learning and recreation, and sites for community and organization events” (http://www.publiceducation.org/papersopeds-schoolcenters.asp).

The number of students enrolled in public education, the central role that public schools play in the life of communities, and the important socializing and democratizing function of public schools (Hillard, 1984) all suggest that the general public has a profound stake in public education. One measure of the significance of this stake is evidenced in the number of political initiatives designed to ensure the
success of public schools, the most recent of which is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (http://www.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/guide/index/html). Although legislation such as NCLB may engender in the public a sense that there is a crisis in schools, in reality the United States has a long history of proposing and implementing political initiatives designed to inform stakeholders of school performance and to pressure schools to achieve particular outcomes (Wong & Meyer, 1994; Murphy, 2003).

The desire and need for continuous public school improvement has been supported by research that extends back at least thirty years (Wolfendale, 1999). This research has accumulated in two broad areas: school effectiveness (James and Connolly, 2000) and school improvement (Hopkins, 2001). The school effectiveness movement focuses primarily on discerning how students find success in meeting academic challenges in areas such as reading (Rogers, Deno, & Markell, 2001), mathematics (Witzel, Smith, Smith, & Brownell, 2001), writing (Bradley, 2001) and other areas (King-Sears, 2001). The school improvement movement focuses more on the general culture of schools and examines issues such as school and community relationships (Cairney, 2000). Despite their different foci, these research areas share a common concern for the evaluation of school performance and accountability. More recently, researchers have investigated the advantages of reconciling these two bodies of research with the goal of broadening the lens through which we view and consequently evaluate our schools (Reynolds, 2001). Ultimately, an integration of
various perspectives may develop in-depth understanding of how schools function and to develop strategies to address needed change.

These research traditions have generated strategies for improvement in multiple areas germane to effective education. These areas include: teacher effectiveness (Banner & Cannon, 1997; Campbell, 2004; Lipka, 1999); methods for teaching reading (Hoffman, Baumann, & Afflerbach, 2000; Calhoun, 1999; Kucer, 2001) and mathematics (Jacobson, 2000; Fennema, Carpenter, & Lamon, 1991); inquiry (Kincheloe, 2003); educational leadership (Witziers, Bosker & Kruger, 2003); special education (Hanushek, 2002); and phonic and whole word strategies for reading (Levy, 1999). One consistent accompaniment to much of this research has been an increasing focus on parent involvement in the educational process and in the life of the school (Block & Tabachnick, 1994).

Although, on its face, parent involvement is a perceived good, researchers have begun to identify different definitions and expectations of parent involvement as well as both positive and negative outcomes of involvement (Crozier, 1999; Desimone, 1999; Walker, 1998). For example, Ng (1999) identified a range of parent involvement activities in his model of home-school cooperation including: "communication (one to two way); helping actual learning of individual children; taking part in parent programmes and organization; assisting in school operations; helping decision making and; participating in decision making" (pp. 558-559). Parental involvement activities such as these vary according to function and purpose, as well as from school to school in their implementation. Of importance to this study,
these activities also reflect the distribution of power in a school community. In short, the effectiveness of parent involvement in the school community relies on factors ranging from parental resources to the degree of equity present within the distribution of power among children, parents and schools (Evans, 2003; Falbo, 2001; McNamara, Hustler, Stronach, & Rodrigo, 2000; Reay, 1999).

An overview of the extant literature suggests that “the social and moral purposefulness of nineteenth-century schools and their connectedness with community contrasts sharply with the twentieth-century professionalization of schools” (Henry, 1996, 14). While the professionalization of schools has been associated with notable improvements such as “higher standards for physical plant, teacher-student ratio, and methods of instruction,” it is also associated with “a distancing of schools from their communities” (Henry, 1996, p. 14). Whereas more recent literature is replete with initiatives and policies that have the goal of partnership between parents and schools, there is also considerable agreement that the ideal of partnership differs significantly from practice (Vincent, 2000; Henry, 1996; Springate & Steglin, 1999). Vincent (2000) comments that, “despite the frequency with which this concept is employed, its manifestation in practice often differs from the rhetorical support for ‘partnership’” (p. 113). Clark (1983) directs his comments at the unfortunate tendency of schools to judge the effectiveness of attempts to enhance parental involvement by focusing on outcomes, such as improved reading levels, at the exclusion of understanding and learning from parents’ perspectives of their relationships with schools. Clark urges researchers to develop, “improved
conceptualizations of parents’ perceptions of control and mutual responsibility in their relations with school personnel” (p. 213).

One particular outcome of professionalization has been the assumption of roles by teachers and parents, those of parents being distinctly less powerful within the context of the school. Sarason (1995) observes that parents have been assigned marginalized roles within - or outside of - the power distribution in schools. Sarason argues that parents should be valued for their knowledge of their children and for their understanding of the system that they began to engage with when they were children. Schools fear that the exploration of parents’ systems of meaning may disrupt the power balance. In reality, its expression offers the potential of initiating dialogue.

The goal of this study is to centralize the experience of parents in interaction with the school and, by so doing, to uncover meaning. This study values parents as knowers whose perspective is located within recalled memories of their own and their children’s experiences in communicating with schools. These recalled experiences provide insight into the sensemaking framework that parents use when interacting with school personnel. Through the recall of Moments of Encounter (MoE), this study will review the remembered experiences of parents as they interacted with those teachers, administrators, and other personnel who constitute the school to identify the central themes that define those moments.

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1 I employ the phrase Moment of Encounter (MoE) in the hope that parent-school communication will evolve to Buber’s (1970) ideal that “All actual life is encounter” (p. 62).
This study will examine surface and deep levels meanings that emerge from parents’ recollections of *Moments of Encounter* with the school and its representatives. Such an examination is designed to reveal power at the micro-level, in the encounter itself, as well as at the macrolevel in the exposure of the taken-for-granted ideology of schools as hegemonic institutions. Awareness of these meanings may enable schools to discover and articulate guiding principles needed to model shared power relationships with parents and build relationships that will ultimately foster the development of children.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter first explores the necessity of grounding communicative research in a theory of discourse and then develops a rationale for situating this study in the critical modernist paradigm. The critical modernist paradigm is then explored for its potential to deconstruct hegemony in organizational life. Educational research into parent-school relationships is reviewed for its role in both identifying discourse and offering a critical view of schools. The function of dialogue is then described in identifying and deconstructing schools as discursive and hegemonic sites.

The goal of this study is to uncover the meanings, understandings of school processes and practices and knowledge of the educational system that parents bring to their interactions with school personnel. These meanings are observed in daily interactions with members of the school organization (i.e. micro-level of practices) (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) which are embedded in larger scale social, cultural, economic and political systems and institutions (i.e. macro-level structural ideologies) as they act to either enhance or constrain communication and relationships.

Grounding Communicative Research in a Theory of Discourse

Communication research must be grounded in a meaningful theory of discourse. Mumby (1997) posits the existence of four paradigmatic discourses that are influential and relevant to communication theory: discourse of representation;
discourse of understanding; discourse of suspicion; and discourse of vulnerability.

These discourses are linked in so far as "each articulates a way of knowing that has different consequences for the way in which we frame issues of community and responsibility" (p. 3). What further differentiates these ways of knowing is the manner by which each discourse helps to articulate central concepts of organizational dynamics. Mumby (2001) named communication, organizational communication, power and ideology as these central concepts.

While not describing Mumby's (1997) analysis in detail, a short statement on each discourse provides context for the critical modernist paradigm that characterizes this study.

Within the discourse of representation, the logical positivist paradigm, the researcher and the object of research are clearly differentiated consistent with Cartesian principles. Communication is viewed primarily as a value-neutral conduit for previously established ideas with the goal of creating closure and control. Within the discourse of understanding, the interpretative modernist perspective, a dialectical tension exists between the subject and object. Consistent with Kantian theory, knowers are linguistic beings whose active minds engage dialogically with one another. The discourse of understanding has the goal of a consensus theory of truth through the reconciliation of this "productive, dialectical tension" (p. 5). Within the discourse of understanding, multiple truths are possible. Truths are derived from social actors and truths result from consensus among those actors. Within the discourse of suspicion, the critical modernist paradigm, organizations are
deconstructed as "discursive sites where meaning and identity are the products of underlying relations of power" (p. 12). Within the discourse of suspicion, surface levels of meaning, that appear to be "consensual systems of meaning," frequently obscure deep level meanings that are characterized by "structure inequalities" (p. 12). In this paradigm, the researcher understands that communication is a means to emancipation and power. The fourth discourse, the *discourse of vulnerability*, postmodernism, "focuses on the processes through which various discursive struggles occur" (Mumby, 1997, p. 16). This discourse is also post-Marxist in so far as it attempts to devalue the grand dimensions of and values the offstage discourse of marginalized groups. Researchers in this discourse attempt to decontextualize communication in order to recognize meaning independent of its power context (Apple, 1996).

For Mumby (1997), these various discourses address the need to "contextualize communication issues when what counts as 'knowledge' is in a state of flux and transformation" (p. 2). Without engaging here the ongoing philosophical discussion of the relative versus absolute nature of truth theoreticians agree that the derivation of meaning - the purpose of this study - is affected by the particular discourse that is applied. Mumby cites Foucault's concern not with truth per se, but "rather with explicating 'games of truth' - implicit rules that shape what counts as knowledge, who can speak such knowledge, and how individuals are constituted as subjects through this knowledge" (p. 2-3). This study then reflects the paradigmatic values and traditions of the critical modernist perspective.
Hegemony provides the conceptual foundation for identifying power dynamics within the critical modernist paradigm. Gramsci’s project introduced hegemony during the early 1900s, a period of social, political and economic change (Fontana, 1993; Ives, 2004; Morera, 1990). According to Fontana (1993), Gramsci conceptualized hegemony in response to “contemporary interpretations of Marxism which he criticized as mechanistic and deterministic” (p. 1). Gramsci’s project “address[es] the problem posed by the relationship between politics and philosophy, a relationship necessary to the formation of a historical and political subject” (Fontana, 1993, p. 22).

The context-bound features of hegemony embrace alignments among social actors as they respond to cultural, political, economic, historical and philosophical influences that exist within social movements and organizational life. These features enable hegemony to be discovered and rediscovered as society and organizations change. Fontana (1993) observes that in Gramsci’s work, “reality is constituted not by discrete elements of thought and action, philosophy and politics, mechanically related to each other, but by the active movement of thought and action, so that reality is constitutive of thought, and thought is inherent in the action that constitutes reality” (p. 22). For example, linking Gramsci’s work to his linguistic orientation, Ives (2004) observes that “language is a site of conflict among different social groups ... “Gramsci shows us that all meaning production, distribution, and reception takes place within socio-political contexts, outside any ‘universal’ frameworks of ethical
behaviour” (p. 136). Morera (1990) explored the historiography of Gramsci, observing that his historicism is free from the color of political ideology and that, for Gramsci, “the activity of human beings, their relations with nature and among themselves are all that is required to explain the process of social transformation” (p. 8).

Gramsci’s work is encompassing, allowing for progressive hegemony, or response to the “popular collective spirit” as well as regressive hegemony, “imposed from above on the majority of people in such a way that they consent to that ruling force” (Ives, 2004, p. 30). Regressive hegemony thrives in the climate of fear that characterizes the daily life of social actors within an organization. For the purpose of this study, regressive hegemony invites the critical investigator and subject to take on the role of co-emancipators in the process of raising consciousness of the ongoing oppression that pervades organizational life.

Gramsci’s project allows for awareness that the politics of power are present in organizational life. For the purpose of this study, awareness of the pervasiveness of power relationships is the key element. Given the centrality of power within micro level interactions among parents and teachers and given that these interactions are embedded in the larger social, cultural and ideological system of the school, the work to be undertaken in this study involves making visible those hidden structures and meanings of power.

From a paradigmatic perspective, Mumby (2001) cites Gramsci’s concept of hegemony as crucial to shift the relatively fixed ideology of Cartesian dualism to “a
dynamic conception of the lived relations of social groups and the various struggles that constantly unfold between and among these groups (p. 598). Hegemony thus contributes to the description of a communicative process by which systems of meaning are developed within subgroups and are then actively taken on by other, generally less powerful groups of stakeholders. These systems of meaning reside within micro level interactions among social actors. Through the lens of hegemony, meaning and power become inextricably linked at conscious and subconscious levels.

Critical theorists endeavor to deconstruct the hegemonic process by raising consciousness of its oppressive forms and, in doing so, pursue emancipation (Oden, 2000; Bieler & Morton, 2004). According to Ives (2004), Gramsci lends insight to the understanding that governing “requires a combination of coercion and consent” (p. 11). Responding to his belief in human reason, hegemony becomes emancipatory as it is also absorbed in his conception of a democracy that is, “not conceived, as is the liberal model, in terms of the relations of power and in terms of elections, but in terms of the collective decision-making of all parts of society, in a society without classes, without any power relations” (Morera, 1990, p.183).

Gramsci’s hegemony anticipated the “emergence and development of the popular masses as a sociopolitical and sociocultural force” (Fontana, 1993, p. 8) – the awareness of which is crucial to the critical paradigm. His writings invite investigators to search for influences that align actors and social movements. By naming the process that aligns actors in response to influences ranging from coercion
by force to agreement without coercion, hegemony has become a foundational concept for critical theory.

The emancipatory tradition of critical theory is, therefore, grounded in theory that has its roots in Marxism and other grand sociologies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Founded in the tradition of Marxism, critical theory transformed to neo-Marxism post World War II. Proponents consider critical theory to be an emancipatory tradition in scholarship, i.e. valuing human reason as an inherently emancipatory drive. According to Alvesson and Willmott (1992), “At the heart of Critical Theory is an assumption that human reason is an emancipatory force that is constrained and distorted by historical conditions” (p. 438). Critical theorists differ from Marxism primarily in their perspective that power resides in the ownership of meaning rather than in the ownership of the means of production. Emancipation, then, occurs as meaning becomes co-owned and co-constructed by members of an organizational community.

The roots of critical theory are also located in the neo-Marxist writings of the Frankfort School. The Frankfort School reconceptualized Marx’s location of power, favoring “a perspective in which both fascism and capitalism were fundamentally conceptualized as involving domination and authoritarianism” (MacDonald, 1998, p. 158). While Marxism critiqued capitalism to name its oppressive character and to encourage liberation through class struggle, neo-Marxism challenges this exclusively economic explanation of power and domination as the prime mechanism of oppression. Beyond economic relations, while acknowledging oppression, neo-
Marxists foreground the cultural and ideological dimensions of power (Mumby, 1997). No longer just a struggle over the means of production, critical theorists conceptualize power "primarily as a struggle over meaning; the group that is best able to 'fix' meaning and articulate it to its own interests is the one that will be best able to maintain and reproduce relations of power" (Mumby, 2001, p. 601).

Critical theory operates at the crossroads of social science and philosophy and has evolved to embrace research on individual, organizational and social dynamics. According to Alvesson and Willmott (1992), critical theory's emancipatory promise exists in its ability "to reflect critically on how the reality of the social world, including the construction of the self, is socially produced and, therefore, is open to transformation" (p. 435). Alvesson and Willmott offer that critical theory has provided a useful counter weight to the "uncritical acceptance of behavioral scientists' understanding of human needs" and the accompanying tendency of behavioral science to preserve, "conditions of work that deny or place socially unnecessary restrictions on processes of self-determination" (p. 436).

Critiques of critical theory have focused on the limitations of human reason as an emancipatory force especially as it is embedded in tradition and culture. Critical theory has been critiqued for its tendency to try to fit all phenomena into a "single, integrated framework" (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992, p.440). Critical theory has also been critiqued for its negativism in questioning virtually all conventional beliefs and assumptions. In part, critical theory has attracted these critiques due to its relentless focus on the inequities of organizational and social life. Despite these critiques, the
critical modernist paradigm is fundamental to this study for its centralized focus on ideology and power.

This study is grounded in a critical paradigm that names organizations as "discursive sites where meaning and identity are the products of underlying relations of power" (Mumby, 1997, p.12). Application of the critical lens enables investigators to reveal deep level hegemonic relationships inherent in organizations. The critical lens serves to identify subtle political dimensions of hegemony that are present in the multiple and complex roles that stakeholders take on as they simultaneously enhance their positions in organizations and submit to the control that organizations have over their lives. The critical approach invites complex analysis that, on one hand, critiques organizations for their inequity while, on the other hand, promises that understanding and responding to those inequities will free organizations to offer members increased equity.

**Communication Scholarship and the Deconstruction of Organizational Power**

Communication scholars have embraced critical theory to provide a substantive framework for the explication of power and ideology in organizational life. Mumby (2001) posits that "critical modernism attempts to reconstruct the Enlightenment project, with communication at its center" (p. 13). Specifically, Mumby (2001) identifies communication as concurrently the site of power and the communicator of power. Communication, in all its diversity, provides an inexhaustible fund of the raw materials by which organizational power is constructed and may be deconstructed. Critical scholarship, according to Mumby (2001), has
evolved from framing struggle as competition over resources to embracing the realization that, at its roots, the struggle for power and domination is concerned with meaning. The analysis of discourse makes sense of the organization while offering hope for reform.

Indeed, Mumby and Stohl (1996) contend that the role of communication scholars is to “challenge the prevailing, commonsense notions of the social world, corporate or otherwise” (p. 57). A critical analysis problematizes organizational dynamics in order to look beyond productivity and understand the communication climate as “an inter-subjective phenomenon that is continuously being structured and restructured by organizational members as they interact with their environment” (p. 61).

Within Mumby’s discourse of representation, communication is perceived as a conduit through which those who hold power assert their authority. Although the discourse of representation does support a surface level explication of the manner by which power is expressed, it does not recognize the depth of the discursive site at which those constitutive elements of communication are continually being created and recreated. Mumby’s three other discourses, understanding, suspicion and vulnerability, are social constructionist lenses through which the constitutive elements of communication are discerned and which support the explication of deep levels of meaning.

Research conducted at the discursive site has the goal of naming surface and deep level organizational dynamics that are frequently obscured within hegemony.
Grounded in the diverse and frequently conflicted realities of culture (Lindlof, 1995) discourse may differ substantively from the “ideal speech situation” (McCarthy, 1978, p. 307) that Habermas describes when “an ideal communication community agree(s) (on ethical norms that) represent their mutual interests” (Griffin, 2000, p. 387). Beyond the surface level content of discourse, the researcher must understand differing meanings that are inherent in each actor’s perceptions. Despite the inherent challenge of deconstruction, the process of deriving meaning from micro-level exchanges holds the promise of emancipation.

Communication scholars deconstruct organizational dynamics with the examination of both surface level and deep level power relations. Surface level power relations are discernible within communicative mediums such as house organ publications, organizational charts, job titles, job descriptions and day-to-day interactions of participants as they encounter one another. In his discussion of capitalist institutional forms, Mumby (2001) contends, however, that surface level power relations can obscure the “deep structure power relations” that contain “pathological, contradictory, and coercive features” (p. 600). Independently, neither surface nor deep perspective offers the basis for a comprehensive understanding of how an organization functions. Rather, it is not only the sum, but also the relationship between surface and deep aspects that offers insight into the workings of power within the organization.

By addressing the dynamics of power, the critical project is pertinent to all manners of organizations. Schools are unique organizations in so far as they include
social actors representing a wide range of ages and are characterized by multiple factors including family ties and professional and parental responsibility for children’s well being and learning. Discourse, then, in schools occurs among people of different ages, gender, family role and professional status. This study is designed to explore micro-level transfer of meaning among families and schools during day-to-day encounters. Reflected in those micro-transfers of meaning, surface and deep levels of meaning emerge and give insight into understanding organizational hegemony.

Locating Hegemony within the School: The Parent-School Relationship as a Discursive Site

The purpose of this study, to pursue a critical investigation through the discovery of meaning within discourse that occurs among parents and school personnel, requires the identification of schools as discursive sites. While the primary purpose of this study is not to offer a hermeneutical analysis of educational research, a reflection on context that places critical research as a heuristic and explores its potential for deconstructing the relationship between parents and schools is the goal. I hope to illustrate how the philosophies of Freire and Buber offer a theoretical framework within which to explore the emancipatory potential of critical theory. Their work invites a reframing of the goals and outcomes of parental involvement research, emphasizing the centrality and emancipatory potential inherent within the communication process and dialogic participation.

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Although the ideal of a democratic community inclusive of families and schools has roots in the philosophy of John Dewey (1927), there is no longstanding research tradition in the area of family-school relationship. Prior to the 1970s, little research explored the impact of family-school relationships on the child. The professionalized status of teachers and administrators, traced to the early 1900s, has, until relatively recently, hardly been challenged in the literature (Henry, 1996). In 1978, Lawrence-Lightfoot observed that, “Social scientists have created a conceptual dichotomy (emphasis added) of the child’s existence into socialization and education, the one shaped by the family and the other shaped by the school.” While living within the constraints of such a dichotomy, teachers and parents might make decisions easily within their own domains, the school or the home, but would encounter difficulty when they try to engage each other through dialectical process.

The professionalized status of educators contributes to a perception that favors a diagnostic/prescriptive relationship between parents and schools. Within this model, just as the physician/patient relationship is conditional on the patient’s trust in the physician’s knowledge and skills, schools respond most favorably to parents who share their values, communicative style, goals for children and cultural mores. The diagnostic/prescriptive relationship does not succeed when values, beliefs, communicative style, goals and cultures clash (Capella-Santana, 2003; Soloman, 1995).
Lacking a working alternative to the conceptual model described by Lawrence-Lightfoot, teachers' perceptions of parents, until relatively recently, have largely remained unchallenged in the literature. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot, the lack of sound research has contributed to the perpetuation of the myth of the *Little Red School House* in the public mind. In this ideology, the school is above reproach and the custodian of moral standards. Citing Jacques Barzun, (*Teacher in America*, 1945), she observes that public schools have been expected to, “generate a classless society, do away with racial prejudice, improve table manners, make happy marriages, reverse the national habit of smoking, prepare trained workers for the professions, and produce patriotic and religious citizens who are at the same time critical and independent thinkers” (p. 56). This perception of schools, rooted in the early history of the American Republic, places parents into a precarious balance between either wholly endorsing a school’s agenda or being perceived as naysayer.

The potential for parents to transcend the socialization-education dichotomy is suggested by research that seeks to identify a typology of parent-school involvement. Falbo, Lein, and Amador (2001) identify five forms of parental involvement including “monitoring the teen’s academic and social life, evaluating the information obtained about the teen, helping the teen with schoolwork, creating positive peer networks for the teen and participating directly in the school” (p. 511). Vincent (1996) identifies four roles that parental involvement might take including, “the parent as supporter/learner; the parent as consumer; the independent parent and the parent as participant” (p. 43) while Edwards and Alldred’s (2000) typology speaks to
the role of children as active or passive contributors to parental involvement. A typology of parental involvement has found expression in the establishment of the National Network of Partnership Schools (Epstein, 1995), which uses a conceptual framework that describes possible parental activities ranging “from supervision of children’s homework to service on school advisory committees” (Julia Wrigley in the forward to Lareau’s *Home Advantage*, 2000, p. xi).

During the past three decades, research conducted on the diversity of race, religion, culture, class, parent’s educational level, gender and values has challenged traditional assumptions about parent/school relationships. These challenges highlight underlying weaknesses in family-school communication. Evidence exists that variables in a pluralistic society, such as race, religion, culture, class, parent’s education level, gender and values, each affect the family school relationship uniquely. For example, Lareau (1999) posits that while, for white working-class families, conflict with a school is usually centered on an individual relationship with a teacher, African American families may feel a “pervasive race-based distrust of the school” (p. 19). Schools are not well equipped to respond to the challenge of pluralism. Epstein (1995) addresses the lack of university training that new teachers have to understand family backgrounds or to respond to diversity in a caring manner. In addition, administrators are not prepared to develop practices that will inform and include parents.

Dichotomizing socialization and education allows for the existence of a model that is not inclusive of relationships that naturally occur among students, teachers and
families. Investigators have researched diverse themes that reflect the fundamental connectedness that is, or should be, inherent in the student/family/school community. Among these themes are: developmental stages in the student-teacher relationship (Frymier & Houser, 2000); affinity-seeking behaviors (Wanzer, 1998); expectancy theory (Yates & Edwards, 1979); and empathy, understanding and responsiveness (Teven & McCroskey, 1996). Rosenfeld, Richman and Bowen (1998) identify forms of support for children (listening support, technical appreciation support, technical challenge support, emotional support and emotional challenge support, reality confirmation support, tangible assistance support and personal assistance support) that are offered through parents and teachers and which affect educational outcomes.

Tension between parents and schools becomes manifest in activities that necessitate working together. For example, Carnaby, Lewis, Martin, Naylor and Stewart (2003) investigate transition review meetings for young people with learning disabilities as they leave special schools. They explore a number of factors that can positively or negatively impact these meetings including the contribution of parents, the importance of friendships and "ensuring that discussion is always meaningful to the student" (p. 191). O'Sullivan and Howe (1996) observe that children's attributions for reading success are directly related to parental beliefs and advocate the introduction of attributional training into reading programs that include parents and children.

The twentieth century has been one of profound change in the perception of organizational life. Schools are no exception. The research summarized in this section
suggests that change in schools necessitates the application of a standard of socialization and equity in response to the established, professionalized norm that minimizes the role of parents. The goal of equity is increasingly present in policy statements of parent participation. Schools, while nominally advancing a standard of equity, often differ in practice. Nonetheless, the presence of policy statements regarding equitable parent participation is challenging schools to alter practice.

Moving from Research to Policy: Attempts to Resolve the Dichotomy

Limitations on the role of parents in American schools have deep historical roots. Lawrence-Lightfoot cites the work of Waller (1932) who examined the school system as “a social entity unto itself” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. 255). According to Lawrence-Lightfoot, Waller’s (1932) description of the relationship between parents and teachers as one of natural enemies is “both overly cynical and piercingly honest” (p. 44). However, while the transition from the programmatic application of research to public policy has been problematic, policy initiatives seem to reflect a desire to reconcile the socialization-education dichotomy.

Julia Wrigley, in her forward to Lareau’s Home Advantage (2000), notes that the student and civil rights movements of the 1960s did contribute to some organizational reform in schools at both the secondary and college levels but contends that “In the more quiescent political environment of the decades since, there have been few situations where parents and allies have mounted significant challenges to those controlling institutions” (p. xiv). She goes on to explain that, “The American educational system fosters what could be called a ‘politics of maneuvering’ where...
parents seek narrow, self-interested goals and seldom challenge, or even learn about, the power relations that shape school districts at higher levels” (p. xiv).

According to McMillan and Cheney (1996), the American system of education has its roots in the “metaphor of organization as machine” (p. 1). The authors argue that, “There is a natural temptation to treat organizations as boxes and their ‘environments’ as everything outside” (p. 6). During the 1980s, associated with the privatization of many societal institutions, the model of student as consumer became increasingly popular with the hope of increasing school accountability for student learning. Bastiani (1993) expresses the need for further research to support the evolution of the perception of parents as consumers and advance toward the perception of parents as partners with schools. While the student as consumer metaphor highlights the need for accountability, McMillan and Cheney (1996) also address the limitations of this metaphor as it contributes to distancing students from the educational process, promoting an entertainment model of learning, compartmentalizing the educational system as a product rather than as a process and reinforcing individualism as opposed to community.

In general, policy initiatives in the United States have tried to impact the system as it is currently structured. In contrast, some countries, notably the United Kingdom and Hong Kong, have developed policy initiatives that mandate parent participation. Although far from seamless, the United Kingdom and Hong Kong have pioneered democratic policy initiatives encouraging schools to “invite parents to participate in the process of decision making.” Ng (1999) frames this trend in, “the
worldwide trend of decentralization and democratization of the power of decision making in schools” (p. 552) and expresses the belief that, “school effectiveness will be maximized when parents become partners at all levels of school education” (p. 559).

Hood (1999) notes that, in 1967, the Plowden Report in England, “gave a new emphasis to parents as a source of potential educational benefit and argued that schools had a duty to encourage parental interest in their children’s education”. However, “the prime goal of working more closely with them (parents) was to involve them as individual ‘supporters’ of schools and school values” (p. 431). In 1998, in response to studies linking parental involvement with positive student outcomes, the United Kingdom passed the School Standards and Framework Act. This act “requires all maintained schools, city schools, city technology colleges and city colleges for the technology of the arts to have a written home-school agreement and associated parental declaration in place from September 1999” (p. 427). McNamara, Hustler, Stronach and Rodrigo (2000) contend that the desire for partnership has been central to educational thought in Britain for at least thirty years but, “what has changed recently is the extent to which the moral imperative is being spelled out in detail” (p. 474). The authors identify parents, pupils, teachers and schools as agents that contribute to both mobilize and demobilize the educational process.
The Problematics of Policy

The problematics of policy development and implementation have been a stimulus to research initiatives. Reflecting on “What should be the boundaries of the schools we need?”, Leithwood, Fullan, and Watson (2003) identify two opposing conceptions of public schools, each of which with profound policy implications. Consistent with the metaphor of organization as machine, schools can be conceived as independent producers that “are largely separate from the rest of society and capable of doing their job well in the absence of much interaction with families, communities and the wider world” (p. 12). The authors advocate an alternative conception of schools as interdependent co-contributors that “value equity as a prominent goal for public schools and consider the building of productive working relationships with parents and the wider community part of the core mission” (p.12).

Investigators such as Epstein (1995), Lareau (1996), Anderson (1998) and Hood (1999) offer that family-school partnerships have generally been, in practice, one-sided and have not viewed parents as equal partners in the educational process. These authors identify factors such as gender, race, culture, and socio-economic status that further problemitize the effectiveness of parental influence in schools.

Difference between organizational policy and practice places parents into an uncomfortable position if they wish to engage the school as equitable partners. Parents interact with school personnel, not with written policy. For the parent who is engaged in an inequitable relationship with a teacher or administrator, the existence
of policy that is at odds with practice can only problemitize her encounter with the school.

Ideology in Educational Research

For the purpose of this study, policy initiatives are considered significant in so far as they encourage micro-level transfer of meaning between families and schools during day-to-day encounters, in what Anderson (1998) terms “forms of direct, local democracy that more adequately address issues of an increasingly pluralistic society” (p. 575). The meaning that is generated during each Moment of Encounter offers insight into the relationship among social actors as well as into organizational dynamics. This meaning also adds to the research that critical investigators have offered to address the inherently unequal distribution of power, or absence of direct, local democracy in the family-school relationship (Anderson, 1998).

Among these researchers, Sarason (Fried, 2003) names democracy as the political principle. He offers that the parent-school relationship frequently resides in hegemony rather than in the political principle. According to Sarason, lack of acknowledgement of the knowledge, insights and skills of those lower down on the hierarchy is endemic in the school system.

“Teachers view parents no differently than they view children, just as administrators view teachers, which is to say that administrators regard teachers as people whose place is in the classroom and only the classroom because beyond its borders are roles and problems about which they know little and are incapable of comprehending and confronting” (p. 217).
Hegemony offers a theoretical construct through which to view the process by parents and schools reinvent their relationship. Within this paradigm, emancipation is achieved not through policy initiatives but within a dialogical relationship. Viewed through the lens of hegemony, the socialization-education dichotomy reveals layers of power and political maneuvering that construct roles for parents in the school life of their children.

**Transforming Hegemony with Dialogue**

Perceptions, policies and ideology are present in each *Moment of Encounter* (*MoE*) (micro-act) between family and school. These moments are meaningful discursive encounters (micro-acts) that are descriptive of hegemony. Awareness by parents and school personnel of the meaning that is inherent in each *MoE* translates into consciousness raising and carries the potential to transform into the shared meaning by which essential organizational change – democratization - becomes possible and reconciliation of the conceptual dichotomy between education and socialization can be attained.

Organizational change, accomplished through the deconstruction of organizations, relies on the ability to discover meaning by encouraging dialogue among social actors. Dialogue is a form of discourse and a process that carries the potential for the communication of meaning and, perhaps of more significance, the ongoing construction of meaning.

In her investigation of conditions that facilitate public dialogue, Zoller (2003) identifies three tensions that inhibit dialogue. These tensions, first "between
collaboration and hierarchy as the original promoters of the initiative struggled to create collegial relations without establishing a hierarchy of leadership and power,” second “disagreement about the role of communication in social change,” some viewing it as an impediment as it replaced action with talk, and, third, a conflict “between the desire to represent and maintain a diversity of interests and the desire to establish consensus” (p. 193) offer insight into the parent school relationship. Zoller offers that, “Dialogic relations involve risking one’s position in order to arrive at new understandings, and a commitment to keep the conversation going” (p. 193).

Two scholars are foundational to understanding dialogue and, hence, inform the effort to encourage dialogue in schools. The writings of Martin Buber and Paulo Freire explore deeply the function of dialogue in the construction of both community and interpersonal relationships. Despite the diverse orientations of their works, these authors contribute profoundly to the understanding of dialogue

Dialogue is a central element in the revolutionary philosophy of Paulo Freire. A familiar figure to educational researchers, Freire (1993) was deeply disturbed at the manner by which the Brazilian government co-opted the educational system to preserve the status quo of vast disparity between rich and poor. Whereas Buber connects dialogue to an exploration of interpersonal communication, Freire’s polemic connects dialogue to a process of revolutionary social transformation.

Freire explicates the potential of dialogue to deconstruct the prevailing order. In Freire’s best known work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1998), he observes that the oppressed in his country “adopted the structure of domination in which they are
immersed” and, in so doing, became “inhibited from waging the struggle for freedom so long as they feel incapable of running the risks it requires” (p. 29). In Freire’s polemic, fear interferes with the innate desire that people have for freedom. The path to liberation is, according to Freire, a painful one, as it involves escaping from the role of oppressed or oppressor and becoming “human in the process of achieving freedom” (p. 31).

As a writer in the neo-Marxist tradition, Freire names the “vague concept of the oppressed” (p. 89) as extending beyond economic oppression. Freire establishes the need of the oppressed to read the world as well as the word. The oppressed are not inherently limited. They have difficulty “in localizing the oppressor outside themselves”. Their oppression plays out in so far as they are “forbidden to know” and must develop “a more critical understanding of how society functions” (p. 105). Beyond social class, the source of oppression within schools is the banking method of education. Teachers who impart information to students without valuing the student’s perspective apply the banking method. According to Freire, the banking method is antidialogical and non-participatory. It can only be resolved by what he names problem posing education.

Problem posing education is a means of promoting critical understanding that changes the world. Problems are posed as they emerge from the collaboration between student and teacher and, “posing the problems of human beings in their relations with the world,” is then resolved through dialogical relations. For Freire (1987), communication is intrinsic in the human world. Roberts (1998) comments
that for Freire, "Dialogue is the means (by) which one person gains access to the world of another person – as far as this is possible – and comes to recreate his or her own way of being in and with the world" (p. 108).

For Freire (1998), true revolution embraces humanization. Humanization does not merely change the names and faces of the oppressors. In humanization, social actors step out of the role of either oppressor or oppressed and engage in dialogical relation. The outcome of dialogue is the mutual naming of both problems and solutions by the former oppressed and oppressor. This knowing, or naming in Freire’s polemic, is a precursor to praxis, the connecting of knowledge with action. Freire (1998) contends that the process of naming is a democratic process “not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone” (p. 69). The process of naming is work as it involves problem identification and then, in the process of resolving problems, new naming.

Although Freire’s perspective focuses primarily on student-teacher relations, his project uncovers universal principles that work when applied to any relationship in which the potential for inequalities of economic, social, cultural or political origin may be manifest. For example, Ford and Yep (2003) apply Freire’s philosophy to health communication within marginalized communities. Freire’s critical strategy for the analysis of discourse can, in fact, be applied to all discourse that involves exchange between oppressed and oppressor. Freire’s explication of dialogue manifests itself not only in differing worldviews but in different language systems as well. Freire (1998) writes that, "In order to communicate effectively, educator and
politician must understand the structural conditions in which the thought and language of the people are dialectically framed” (p. 77). Freire’s project is one of social liberation in which dialogical relations free the oppressed, solve problems and create social justice.

Martin Buber, the other great philosopher of dialogue, developed a philosophy of a good and balanced life, consistent with his roots in Hasidic Judaism, which is more oriented to guiding the individual to live in society than to guiding society to revolutionary change. Buber (1948, 1970) names the simultaneous simplicity and complexity of dialogue. His analysis introduces the reader to two domains of human experience that occur differentially within and among social actors. Buber (1970) named these domains, I-It, which is “in them” and I-You, that which is “between them and the world” (p. 56).

For Buber, I-It occurs within a person. The world does not participate in I-It experience and it does not contribute. When talk is expressed as part of an I-It experience, it serves only to objectify and not to build relationship.

I-You experience connects a person by relationship with the natural world, with other men or with spiritual beings. Although people cannot live in the I-You experience all of the time, this experience is essentially dialogical and conducive to relationships that are essential for community. I-It experiences, on the other hand, do not build community.

Buber’s project invites the investigation of meaning as it is revealed within relationships among social actors in the schools. Buber’s (1970) observation that,
“All actual life is encounter” (emphasis added) (p. 62) encourages questioning the limitations of the outcome orientation of so much of school research. From the perspective of Buber’s work, it is possible to deconstruct relationships within school communities as they either objectify actors or as they promote encounter among actors. Dialogue, then, is essential to Buber’s notion of community or communion with.

This chapter first grounded communicative research in theory of discourse as outlined by Mumby (1997). Within the context of Mumby’s work, the contribution of Gramsci has been explored as it articulates the emancipatory promise of the critical modernist paradigm. This chapter continues to explore the projects of Freire and Buber whose explications of dialogical relations name communication as the indispensable link between human beings and the world. Within this theoretical grounding, it becomes possible to locate the parent-school relationship as a discursive site where hegemony occurs. The socialization-education dichotomy with its implications for research and policy, is contextualized within the framework of hegemony. This chapter then explores multiple factors that are present in each Moment of Encounter and establishes it as a technique for uncovering meaning in parent-school communication. This chapter articulates the goal of transforming hegemony with dialogue, fulfilling the promise of the critical project.

R.Q. 1 – How does centralizing the perspective of parents contribute to deconstructing the communicative and power dynamic of schools?
R.Q. 2 – How do the communication choices that parents make to engage the hegemony inherent in school systems inform the process of deconstructing those systems?
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter establishes that dialogic inquiry, rooted in critical theory, has both deconstructive and emancipatory potential. Much educational research is outcome oriented. This chapter posits that the investigation of parent school encounters using the Moment of Encounter (MoE) technique offers insight into the power distribution in schools through the explication of meaning from discourse. This chapter also situates this study within the Modernist paradigm by exploring the relationship between subject and researcher. Critical Modernist methods within the naturalist paradigm are reviewed for their contribution to deconstructing organizational power and offering liberation out of the relationship between researcher and subject. Memorable message and critical inquiry techniques are reviewed for their contributions to the study of organizational functions and the formation of personal meaning. The Moment of Encounter is offered as an investigative technique that connects the recall of micro-acts to an understanding of macro structures of organizational power. Finally, data collection and data analysis techniques of this study are reviewed.

The goal of this study is to find meaning in parents' remembered Moments of Encounter with school personnel. By addressing parent-school relationships within the critical modernist paradigm, this study is designed to reveal deep levels of
meaning that are representative of inequitable distribution of power and frequently obscured and/or ordered by organizational hegemony.

Situating the Research: Paradigms of Inquiry

Positivist and naturalist projects have influenced inquiry since the beginning of the industrial age. Each paradigm is bounded by its own ontological, epistemological, axiological, methodological and rhetorical assumptions.

Within the perspective of the positivist paradigm, reality is singular and objective. The researcher is an independent entity and is differentiated from the subject of research by clearly defined boundaries. Positivist inquiry strives to be value-free and to develop research processes that determine cause and effect and are replicable by more than one researcher. Positivists report on their inquiry using a formal, impersonal voice (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000).

Within the naturalist (interpretive) paradigm, multiple realities are expected and derived out of the perspectives of researchers who exist interdependently with the subjects of their research. Acknowledging the subjective nature of reality, research becomes value-laden and context-bound. The researcher within this paradigm reports in a personal, informal voice (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000). Within the perspective of the interpretive paradigm the borders between researcher and social actor become permeable, enabling entry into the social world of the actor. According to Lindlof (1995), within the interpretive paradigm “it is axiomatic that one needs to see a social situation from the point of view of the actors in order to understand what is happening in that situation” (p. 30).
The interpretive paradigm offers a perspective within which social actors simultaneously experience reality and construct reality in lived relationships. Interpretive research discovers the subjective reality as it is constructed from moment to moment by listening to social actors who experience reality from their own diverse standpoints. According to Frey, Botan and Kreps (2000) naturalist (of which interpretive is a part) inquiry is guided by three assumptions. Phenomena should be researched in their natural context (naturalism), the investigator should put aside preconceived notions about the phenomenon under investigation (phenomenology) and the investigator cannot fully put aside his or her own interpretations and therefore should rather weave them in with the interpretations and descriptions of subjects (interpretive) (p. 258).

Within the interpretive paradigm, the ideal role of the researcher is more akin to being a medium between the world of subject and all other socially constructed worlds. The researcher realizes full well that her perspective affords a unique understanding of the subject. The unique perspective of a second investigator adds to understanding the subject. This study, in its examination of meaning for parents, is well situated within this naturalistic paradigm.

Methodological Approaches within the Naturalist Paradigm

Since the early 1980s (Lindlof, 1995), researchers have developed methods of inquiry that are consistent with naturalistic inquiry and recognize permeable boundaries that exist between researcher and subject. Interpretive methods engage investigator and participants, sometimes termed co-researchers, and foreground their
diverse and complementary perceptions of reality. Interpretive researchers frequently use more than one method to examine a subject’s worldview. Frey, Botan and Kreps (2000) name these methods as *ethnography*, *ethnomethodology*, *autoethnography* and *critical ethnography*.

Ethnographic researchers endeavor to develop a deep and broad understanding of the social world that is being investigated. According to Lindlof (1995), ethnography has as its goal a “holistic description of cultural membership” (p. 20). Ethnography asks questions such as, “what people do and don’t do, and why people think they should do those things and avoid the others” (p. 259). Although ethnographers may use different interview styles, *field interviewing* is considered to be a useful tool as it enables the investigator to pursue the interview process, either formally or informally, without asking social actors to leave the field and enter the inauthentic environment of an office or laboratory.

Ethnomethodology differs from ethnography primarily in having less concern with a holistic description of society and more interest in “the local construction of meaning through certain interactional practices, mostly conversational” (Lindlof, 1995, p. 36). The goal of these methods is to reveal the life world of the group through the meaning that is present in each experience. Investigators examine the lives of actors as participant observers who “seek to understand the everyday, commonplace talk routines people use to socially construct the world” (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000, p.260). Participant observers integrate themselves into the social scene as participants and take field notes detailing those observations. Participant observers
also may break out of the participant role periodically to interview subjects. Lindlof (1995) notes that, “such interview(s) go by several names with slightly different shades of meaning and practice: in-depth, unstructured, semi-structured, intensive, collaborative and ethnographic” (p.5). These interview forms vary along the dimensions of directiveness and depth.

The goal of this study is to invite the potential for change that is present in the critical application of ethnomethodology. Frey, Botan and Kreps (2000) note that, in critical ethnography, description and interpretation are not enough as “the purposes of social justice, emancipation and empowerment” (p. 260) should be served.

This study begins with the assumption that schools are hegemonic systems characterized by relationships of power and oppression. According to Lindlof (1995), critical ethnography is, in and of itself, a political act as it foregrounds the views and ideas of the less powerful. For the critical ethnographer, “description and interpretation are not enough: research must also be directed toward constructive action with and on behalf of the group under study, especially those who are marginalized” (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000, p. 260). This study foregrounds the voices of parents who have been marginalized by the oppressive power of schools in their interactions with school personnel concerning their children’s academic success and social and emotional well being.
Critical Ethnomethodology: Uncovering the Locus of Meaning through Memorable Message and Critical Inquiry Techniques

In developing a methodological approach for this study, I draw upon the research strategies of memorable messages and critical incident techniques in interviewing parents about their meetings with teachers and/or school administrators. In the following, each specific strategy is reviewed and an argument for the conceptual integration of these techniques is provided.

**Memorable Message**

The flexibility of the memorable message format has enabled its use in such diverse ways as to analyze support and nonsupport messages received by nurses in a hospital (Ford & Ellis, 1998), as a guide to the self-assessment of behavior and idealized self-image (Smith & Ellis, 2001; Smith & Ellis, 2001), to understand organizational socialization (Stohl, 1986) and the socialization of new university faculty (Dallimore, 2003), as well as to understand the socialization of people in the aging process (Holladay, 2000).

Notwithstanding differing applications, investigators have generally agreed with the underlying characteristics of memorable messages that were identified by Knapp, Stohl and Reardon (1981). Knapp and colleagues identified the memorable message technique as action-oriented, oral, and personally delivered statements that are generally received in a brief format from an older, higher status individual. The message is remembered even years later and identified by the receiver as having impacted her or his life, generally for the positive. The essential or core aspects of a
memorable message appear to be that it is recalled, even after a long time, and that
the individual perceives the message as having had a significant impact on her or his
life. Holladay (2002) points out that studies of memorable messages typically
"perform socializing functions by communicating expected behaviors, decision
premises and preferred attitudes" (p. 683).

Critical Incident Technique

Flanagan (1954) introduced the critical incident technique to the literature in
1954 arising out of work that he had done with the U.S. Air Force to measure issues
such as pilot failure and combat leadership. Flanagan describes the technique as, "a
set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way
as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing
broad psychological principles" (p. 327). In a critical incident investigation, social
actors are asked to revisit and provide narrative accounts of a particular incident in
which they participated. Flanagan designed the technique to measure typical
performance, proficiency, training, selection and classification, job design, operating
procedures, equipment design, motivation and counseling (p. 357).

By reviewing a number of such accounts of an incident, the investigator is
able to reconstruct what happened from varying perspectives. According to Query,
Kreps, Arneson and Caso (2001). "it is a phenomenological data-collection process
well designed to capture the dominant signs, symbols, and themes that forge
participants’ social reality" (p. 93).
The design of the critical incident technique has been used widely in hospital and other medical settings. Typically, the technique is applied when a need to review errors or near errors occurs. The review concentrates on how actors followed procedures or reacted under stress (Muir & Ogden, 2001; Narayanasamy, 2001; O’Connor, 2003). The technique provides “a powerful means for capturing polarized narratives to facilitate interaction management and guide organizational responses” (Query, et al, 2001, p. 92). The critical incident technique has also been used to assess teacher and administrator performance in public schools (Berardi, 1985; Hathaway, 1982; Hughes, 1982; Huber, 1972).

While the critical incident technique has relevance to this study in so far as it involves the revisiting of a particular event in the lives of actors, it is designed to evoke recall of action rather than meaning. In this sense, the critical incident methodology is not designed to be a critical ethnography technique. Memorable message generally focuses on how the message itself influenced both the weltanschauung (i.e. worldview) and the personal life of the actor. The memorable messages technique, while eliciting meaning from participants, does explicate that meaning in order to understand the hegemonic characteristics of the organization or to inform the actions of actors in their engagement with the organization.

Locating Meaning in the Moment of Encounter

In the tradition of critical ethnography, I suggest the term Moment of Encounter (MoE) to name a technique for deconstructing organizational dynamics. In common with memorable messages and critical incident techniques, Moment of
Encounter asks an actor to recall a particular encounter between her and one or more organizational members who generally possess a higher level of status and power. The technique relies on structured and/or semi-structured interviews to elicit from actors the memory of what happened and to reflect on the recalled incident by drawing on their knowledge of organizational dynamics, conscious or subconscious feelings related to the location of power, recalled feelings that were evoked by the encounter, and, perhaps even reaching back into childhood, recalling similar encounters from the past and the feelings that those encounters evoke and influence the present.

Moments of Encounter frequently occur in settings where actors have limited access to power. In addition, parent-teacher meetings and Individual Educational Planning (IEP) (Dabkowski, 2004; Zickel & Arnold, 2001) meetings may be structured to limit parent access to institutional power. In the context of schools, these Moments of Encounter may serve to offer parents the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the power relationship between them and their schools as they deconstruct those messages.

Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (2003) interviews with parents and teachers reveal the power of Moments of Encounter to live on, even in an intergenerational manner. Her interviews, focused on the existence of ghosts in the classroom (pp 3-41), locate encounters that teachers had with their teachers during their school days and connect those events with current encounters that the same teachers currently have with parents. Her explication of borderlands and crossroads uses the metaphor of school
as theater to address the way in which, "parent-teacher meetings become the tiny stage on which these broad cultural priorities get translated into dialogue" (p. 218). Each *Moment of Encounter* connects individuals, systems and generations in ways that are critical to the lives of children.

**Participant Characteristics**

Parents who were selected to participate in this study have children who are now attending or have attended public schools. Parent participants also have had experience meeting with school personnel regarding their children's academic and/or affective development. These parents have, in general, have had a good deal of contact with teachers and/or administrators. Often special education students interact with one or more general education classroom teachers as well as a special education teacher who provides daily supplemental instruction. Parents may also have had these contacts in addition to contacts with aides, principals, counselors and school psychologists. Additionally, due to their children's unique issues, parents of special education students are likely to request more contact with school personnel.

All special education students in the United States have an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) that must be reviewed at least annually. In addition, a reevaluation of eligibility for services occurs every three years. The IEP meeting usually includes, at a minimum, the general education teacher, the special education teacher and the school principal. The three-year reevaluation also includes, at a minimum, a school psychologist.
The purpose for including parents of special education students in this study is to increase the likelihood of their having had increased participation with school personnel. These contacts occurred with more frequency, with a wider variety of school personnel and in both informal and mandatory, formalized settings.

Procedures

Solicitation of Participants

Fifteen interviews were conducted from among the members of Parent to Parent of Southwest Michigan (Parent to Parent). Thirteen of the interviews were conducted with the mother only, one interview was conducted with the father only and one interview was conducted with both mother and father. Although demographic data was not solicited, the interviewees appeared to be from middle or upper middle socio-economic backgrounds and were all fluent English language speakers. There were no interviewees representing minority groups.

Parent to Parent is a support group for parents of children with disabilities. Parent to Parent is a parent support group that offers free services to the families of children with disabilities. The Parent to Parent program includes mentoring for parents, information and referral services, information on partnering with professionals and participation in support groups.

Parents were solicited by email invitations sent through the Parent to Parent email list. In addition, I met directly with parent members of Parent to Parent, at meetings that are scheduled at least monthly, in order to directly solicit their
participation. Members of Parent to Parent were also asked to recommend friends and relatives who meet the sample characteristics for this study.

Parent participants were given the Informed Consent document, description of the study, and rights and risks of participation (see Appendix) prior to being interviewed.

Data Collection Procedures

This study was designed to elicit meaning from parent descriptions of positive and negative *Moments of Encounter* with representatives of public schools who have interacted meaningfully with their children. Fundamentally, this study is situated in the tradition of Grounded Theory (Strauss, 1987). Strauss offered Grounded Theory as an alternative to social research that lacks an appreciation of the complexity of social phenomena. “One of our deepest convictions is that social phenomena are complex phenomena” (Strauss, 1987, p. 6). The acknowledgement of the complexity of social phenomena opens Grounded Theory to diverse data collection techniques that include, “interviews, transcripts of meetings, court proceedings, field observations, like diaries and letters; questionnaire answers, census statistics; etc.” (Strauss, 1). Clearly, Grounded Theory allows latitude for the investigator to choose among various procedures for data collection in any individual study.

Data collection for this study was designed to capture meaning from parent recollections of *Moments of Encounter*. A *Moment of Encounter* is characterized by the convergence of factors both within and outside of the actor. These factors include the power structure within which the encounter occurs, antecedent events such as the
incident that brought the parent and school together, the content of the communication that occurred - both stated and unstated, as well as the influence of the moment in eliciting ghosts of previous encounters with the school (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). The purpose of analysis is to draw meaning from those collective factors. That meaning, as it is revealed, carries the potential of emancipation for the actor(s) – both parent and school representative - and the system.

I drew upon Memorable Message and Critical Incident techniques in developing data collection procedures for this study.

Memorable messages are generally associated with personal learning that relates to the remembered message. The actor is asked to recall the moment as well as the message. Memorable message research tells us that, at certain moments in our lives, we receive messages from others, usually in positions of greater power, which not only affect the course of our lives significantly, but are remembered more distinctly than the bulk of communication that we experience.

Critical incidents are associated with the gathering together of the recollected observations and feelings of people who participated in a particular critical incident. The degree to which that incident is reconstructed through those observations and feelings enables researchers to comment constructively on the system within which the incident occurred. Critical incident research often reflects on medical incidents in order to suggest system changes that could contribute to more constructive outcomes in the future.
Both Memorable Message and Critical Incident techniques rely heavily on interviews as data collection tools. Of course, other tools, such as patient logs, may also be useful in achieving the goal of “finding and gathering – or generating – if materials that the researcher will then analyze” (Strauss, 1987, p. 20). The **Moment of Encounter** interviews that gather data for this study are semi-scheduled planned sets of questions that will be asked of each participant (Appendix A). The interviews also contain an open-ended component in so far as I will ask subjects to extend their responses based on the moment-to-moment availability of meaning as the interview goes on. The **Moment of Encounter** technique is designed to draw from both critical incident and memorable message formats so as to derive meaning from a remembrance of a micro-act that will lend insight into organizational hegemony.

The use of a **Moment of Encounter** interview places personal learning and system change in tension with each other. Upon asking a subject to recall a particularly significant **Moment of Encounter** with the school, the researcher is assuming that the moment will offer insight into the organization’s power structure as well as the particular personality and observations of the subject. In MoE, feelings and events that the subject recalls are of no particular value unless they connect with the organization.

Data Analysis

Grounded Theory lends itself well to this form of critical research as it acknowledges a priori the depth and complexity of social phenomena. As such, within Grounded Theory the analysis of data is more a process in which categories of
understanding evolve and overlap. Despite its widespread use, Grounded Theory has received criticism.

Charmaz (2003) moves from what she refers to as the “subtle positivistic premises assumed by grounded theory’s major proponents and within the logic of the method itself” to what she names as constructivist grounded theory. According to Charmaz, constructivist grounded theory “assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims toward interpretive understanding of subject’s meanings” (p. 250). This study is interested in drawing out multiple realities from the past and present in order to attain an interpretive understanding of the organization. The research methodology used in this study is consistent with the principles of constructivist grounded theory in so far as it acknowledges multiple realities that emerge as remembrances of the past are integrated with perceptions of the present and even hopes and visions of the future. Understandings are interpretive and emerge as the researcher cooperates with the actor in the process of co-constructing meaning.

All interviews were initially transcribed. Analysis of data was accomplished by reading transcripts of interviews with the goal of developing a thematic analysis of the power allocation in these school and parent moments of encounter. As transcripted interviews were read and re-read, ideas and significant phrases were written on sticky notes along with page reference. Sticky notes were arranged and repeatedly rearranged on large masonite boards until it was possible to ascribe open ended coded headings to groups of sticky notes. Open ended codings gradually
evolved into axial codings as sticky note groupings were refined. Finally, sticky notes were transferred onto notebook pages.

Repeated readings of interviews identified those acts of control and power at the surface level (who participated, who dominated the encounter and what was the subject matter of the encounter), enabled a deeper understanding of the power dynamics by probing the feelings that parent participants felt (i.e. “I felt powerless”) and evolved toward a meta-analysis broader themes and issues that pervade the school as an organization and that transcend the character of individuals and individual schools. This analysis identified core characteristics of power in schools and reflected the differential ways in which individual schools, administrators and teachers deal with the challenges that those power structures present.

In this chapter, I have located Moment of Encounter within the paradigm of naturalistic (interpretive) inquiry. I have also defined Moment of Encounter and explored its relationship to memorable message and critical incident techniques. This chapter outlines the context and methodology within which my research is undertaken.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter explores findings derived from parent interviews. The first section of the chapter describes themes of parent perception, the second section explores themes of parent interventions in schools and the third section explores meta-themes that are derived from explication of interviews.

Parent Perceptions of Schools

The first section of this chapter presents perceptions that parents have of their communicative interactions with schools. Deconstruction of these interviews reveals the depth, complexity and intensity of these engagements. The variety of themes also points to the complexity of the hegemony that parents engage in supporting their children’s education. Themes include: inclusion/exclusion, awareness by schools of the impact of their communication; predetermination of meeting outcomes; resource allocation and; criticism as an exclusionary tool.

Inclusion/Exclusion

Parents want their children to find a place in society. To varying degrees, disabilities limit access to society. For example, a person whose disability affects her mobility has limited access to the normal movement of human affairs. A person whose disability affects hearing is limited from processing the full flow of conversation.
In the mid-19th century, the principle of normalization (Ericsson, 1985) evolved in Scandinavia as a sociopolitical concept. This principle asserted that handicapped could live normal lives among the non-handicapped and make positive contributions to society. In the United States, the mid-20th century saw the rise of liberation movements for the disabled as well as other marginalized groups such as women and minorities. Inclusion became a banner for legal and social movements that encourage the normal participation of disabled persons in schools and in society.

One focus of this social movement was educational inclusion. In the schools, inclusion became a standard for special education services with the support of the law and parental attitudes. The courts have guided schools to endorse the ideal of “least restrictive setting” and enforced the use of Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) for disabled children. (Douvanis, 2002; French, 1992).

Inclusion presents a unique challenge to schools (NCERI Bulletin, 1996). Inclusion involves educating special needs children with general education peers for at least part of their day. It is an alternative to removing those children to be educated in segregated special education rooms. Advocates argue that both children’s academic and social needs can be more effectively met by inclusion than by pullout (Elliot, McKenney, 1998; Gerrard, 1994).

Without exception, parents in this study want their children to be included in the school community. References to inclusion varied from concrete to inferential, from practical to idealized. For example, some parents describe inclusion simply as

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2 The practice of removing disabled children from their general education classrooms for the purpose of providing instruction in special education rooms.
the placement of their child in a general education classroom. Broader, more transformative definitions include fundamental shifts in teachers’ and principals’ attitudes and school policies. The broadest conceptualizations describe inclusion as a community, rather than school, phenomenon in which all children, regardless of disability, are full participants in the community.

In these interviews, parents recalled communicative experiences that occurred as they advocated for the inclusion of their children in the academic, social and physical life of the school. These recalled experiences reflect poignantly the effects of inclusion and exclusion on child, parent, and family.

Parent F’s son is Autistic. While in kindergarten, despite being in what might be described as an inclusion setting, her son did not feel accepted. She describes her son’s kindergarten classroom as being full of big tables so that the children sit together in groups. Her son, however, was physically separated from the other children. He sat at his own smaller table at one side of the room. According to his mother, her son would come home and say, “I don’t want to go to school. I don’t want to go to school.”

Parent F met with the school’s principal and asked her to move her son to another, more inclusive, classroom. Following that meeting, she also kept in touch with the teacher aide so that she could continue to get updated information.

Through her son’s teacher aide, Parent F discovered that the principal had plans for her son and had arranged to meet with her son’s teachers without her being present. Parent F was less upset at being left out of the meeting than she was at being
denied the opportunity to provide input to the teacher and other personnel involved with her son. She decided that, instead of demanding to be present at the meeting, she would send email messages to the personnel involved.

Following Parent F’s emails the meeting was held without her presence. Apparently, her emails had the intended consequence and a decision was reached to move her son to another teacher. Parent F witnessed that, in his new setting, the change in her son was so profound that she describes being “shocked.” She remarked, “You know, that (new classroom) was the first experience where it really made me feel confident that this was the best place and they were going to take him in and that he wouldn’t be any different than any other kid in that school – you know – and that because he did have special needs they would give him a little more consideration. I was shocked.”

Parent O’s child has also been diagnosed with autism. Parent O became aware of the difficulties that her son faced after noticing changes in his behavior. Specifically, he had been placed into a Preprimary Impaired (PPI) program with quite a few other autistic children. PPI classrooms are designed exclusively for disabled children as general education students generally do not begin attending school until preschool or kindergarten. Inclusion is, generally speaking, not a function of Preprimary Impaired classrooms.

While he was in the PPI classroom, Parent O’s son began mimicking the behaviors of other children. For Parent O, that “wasn’t healthy.” Also “there wasn’t a lot of talking and laughing” in the PPI classroom. While in many ways he was
appropriately educated, Parent O was concerned with the classroom environment because her son was modeling behaviors that he observed in other children. She wanted him to associate with non-disabled peers.

When he reached kindergarten age, although her son received many needed services at school, his mother wanted him to be placed into a general education classroom. The option of inclusion with the general education population became viable in kindergarten. She negotiated with the school’s administrator to have her son transferred to an inclusive kindergarten classroom. Making this change required moving her son to another school building.

Two things happened when her son changed schools. First, he entered a general education classroom in which he could model the behaviors of non-disabled children. Second, he experienced immediate, unqualified acceptance. Parent O relates that the new teacher said, “Oh, he’s welcome to come here. If it was my kids (sic) it was what I would do, too.” Parent O felt that this placement was very positive for her son and “we (our family) were really fortunate.”

In general, parents observed that exclusionary schools create roadblocks to inclusion. Parents do not believe that these roadblocks are justified. For them, lack of inclusion is the result of exclusionary attitudes and culture rather than the result of paucity of resources, the typically proffered excuse. In describing her first interaction with a school district, Parent M describes school personnel as perfunctory and bureaucratic, claiming that their lack of appropriate resources warranted not accepting her child into their district.
My son was two, and we had called the district and said this is what’s going on, you know, we need him diagnosed, whatever. They diagnosed him and then told us that we weren’t really in the right school district. So they switched us to a different school district, um, and when they switched us to the different school district they got our paperwork lost and stuff like that.

Unlike parents who describe exclusion primarily as it affects their child, Parent D’s recalled experience illustrates the profound manner by which exclusionary behaviors affect the entire family. Responding to the issues concerning her son, Parent D’s efforts to move the school to a more inclusionary posture backfired and had ramifications for her as well.

Parent D’s son has a tracheotomy and paralyzed vocal chords. His medical needs necessitate the constant presence of a nurse or a parent. Her son’s ability to integrate into the community was already limited by his medical needs. Parent D found that the teacher did not want her son in her class. She recalls the teacher telling her, “I think your child belongs at a school with other kids like him.” The teacher then framed Parent D’s attempt to have her son included as a selfish act. “I think you’re being selfish – just going for what you want – not your child.”

Parent D and her child both felt excluded. Parent D recalls that she observed a lack of willingness by the teacher to expend energy on her son’s education. “She hadn’t met my child, didn’t know my child.” Based only on her knowledge of the
disability, her son’s teacher “basically said that no one wanted our child – that she had heard about me – nobody wanted us or our child in this school.”

Exclusion occurs when the disabled, for whatever reason, are afforded limited access to the physical and communicative flow of society. Parents expressed happiness, however, when their children were included in the daily life of the school. Their descriptions of inclusion reflect remarkably similar behaviors on the part of schools. Inclusionary schools treated children in a friendly and relaxed manner as they cut through red tape quickly and efficiently. Inclusionary teachers tended to refer to their classrooms as _communities_ or families. Inclusion extended beyond the child to the family. Parents felt themselves included in the life of the school along with their children.

In general, the parents who participated in this study tended to evaluate their schools based on their children’s real participation with general education peers. The following sections explore issues that are subsumed under the umbrella of inclusion such as the awareness by schools of the impact of communication, the predetermination of meeting outcomes; the competing needs of general and special education children and the use of criticism as an exclusionary tool.

**Awareness by Schools of the Impact of their Communication**

Inherent in parent comments is the perception that some school personnel lack sensitivity to the damage and hurt that their words and actions cause families and children. Intentional or unintentional, these remarks affect families deeply and represent the distribution and use of power. Affected by insensitive remarks, parents
tend to perceive schools as bureaucratic institutions which focus on policies and procedures rather than on children and families. Parents felt that in order to sustain an egalitarian and inclusionary climate, school personnel should be vigilant in avoiding insensitive feedback. This view finds support from Sailor and Blair (2005) who contend that "a sense of unity and a culture of belonging" are essential components of successful inclusion (p. 508),

Parent A felt that insensitivity was embedded in policies that directed resources such as teacher-student ratio and availability of aides primarily to children with greater academic potential. She felt that insensitive school personnel do damage by looking the other way. According to Parent A, "They do it unconsciously. They don't realize it – I don't think. I don't think they realize what they're doing so they can't change it. They don't realize that's happening."

For Parent B the school's insensitivity was felt very personally. Parent B, who is a special educator herself, saw insensitivity in the notes that were sent home by her daughter's teacher. Although her daughter's Down Syndrome and verbal apraxia limit her ability to verbally report to her parents about her school day, Parent B and her husband began to suspect that things were not going as they wished at school when negative notes - one calling their kindergarten daughter a "belligerent pistol" - began arriving.

The parents also noticed that their daughter was crying more and, while playing school at home, would time herself out or would grab her brother's face while pointing to play flash cards. In other words, at home, their daughter was mimicking
the punishment and negative treatment that she had received in class. Parent B felt that the school was insensitive to the damage that was being done by using punishment and negative expectations rather than working to discover what her daughter could do and work from there.

In response, she and her husband made it their responsibility to encourage sensitivity to their daughter. Parent B extensively logged her daughter’s progress and maintained detailed records of feedback from school. She then shared those records with her daughter’s teacher and principal in the hope of improving the situation. The principal said that she would observe the classroom. Parent B told the principal, “when you’re in there, the teacher is going to act differently than when you’re not in there. It’s human nature.” The principal insisted on making the observation and, upon completing it, told Parent B that her staff was all good and “that just doesn’t happen” in her school. In frustration, the parents finally withdrew their daughter from school and elected to educate her at home.

Whether the school’s insensitivity to her input was intentional or not, Parent B was disappointed with the school’s position. Not only was her daughter ultimately excluded, but the entire family was separated from the school community in order to attend to their daughter’s social and educational needs.

Parent I felt that her daughter’s teacher and teacher aide were insensitive to her feelings. Parent I’s daughter also has Down Syndrome. Like Parent B, Parent I wanted her daughter included in a general education classroom. In accord with her wishes, Parent I’s daughter had been fully included in preschool and, according to her
mother, had “phenomenal experiences with inclusion.” Parent I felt that her daughter had grown during the warm, inclusionary atmosphere of her preschool years.

Parent I was understandably upset when she received a letter from her daughter’s kindergarten teacher aide informing her that her daughter would do better and “be more happy” in a special education classroom. She later received a similar letter from her daughter’s teacher. Parent I maintained her daughter in the general education kindergarten despite these attitudes.

Compounding the issue of insensitivity by individual staff members, Parent I observed that the school’s administration was insensitive to the vastly different circumstances that her daughter encountered as she transitioned from year to year. While trying to reconcile these issues, Parent I met with school administration several times. Those meetings met with limited success. According to Parent I, “I felt like it shouldn’t be my responsibility to have to police the classroom. (To) police my daughter’s education. But, in reality, it seems that way. Like I have to stay on top of stuff all the time or…”

For Parent I, letters that she received during her daughter’s kindergarten year and attitudes of her daughter’s third grade teacher convinced her that the school was an insensitive, bureaucratic institution that valued its own needs more than those of children. She describes the school as, “Very bureaucratic. Very unwilling to change. They really say they’re pro-children but sometimes I really wonder. You have to fit how they do things rather than being flexible to meet the needs of all kids. And that’s pretty much it in a nutshell.”
Encountering insensitivity in those whose job it is to meet the social, emotional and educational needs of children is frustrating and difficult for parents. Parents are often left in a quandary. Is the school actually unaware or does it feign lack of awareness as a convenient foil against putting resources into children who are not really valued? The responses of parents reflect their quandary. They may retreat and become frustrated and angry or put extraordinary energy into creating awareness. If they do engage the school, they feel uncertain whether their actions will result in the inclusion of their child or result in ongoing and increased exclusion.

**Predetermination of Meeting Outcomes**

Supported by legal guidelines for special education meetings, (Douvanis, 2002, French, 1992) parents conceptualize Individual Educational Planning teams (Fish, 2006), as well as parent teacher meetings and informal discussions, as opportunities to have input into educational planning for their children. Several parents, therefore, expressed frustration and anger at school personnel who seemed to predetermine meeting outcomes and participated at those meetings only at a surface level.

Parent L’s son had been enrolled in a classroom for autistic children. Parent L was positive about that program and believed that her son’s needs were being addressed. When her son turned ten, however, the school informed her that he was too old to remain in that program and offered “options” of other placements. Parent L did not feel that those options were viable. The school wanted to bus her son, for one
year, to another school where no autistic programming was available. After that year her son would be sent to middle school and high school in a town even further away.

Parent L described the “chit chat” that occurred when she finally met with school personnel as an act designed to make it appear that a democratic decision making model was in place. During the meeting her son’s teacher said, “So I know you’ve been checking out your options and how do you feel about it? What would you like us to do? What would you like?” And meanwhile, based on her experience with her child’s school, Parent L thought, “...you wonder all the time – why are you even asking this (be)cause you know you’re not going to get it.... You know you’re not going to get anywhere. I know I’m not going to get it – so what’s the point in going? But who’s going to fight for him if you (I) don’t.”

Parent A experienced similar feelings when she approached her school about her daughter’s educational program. Parent A was determined that her daughter would be included in a general education kindergarten classroom after three years of preschool special education classes. When the school insisted that she take her daughter to a kindergarten round-up, it felt like a “set-up.” Parent A’s daughter had just been assessed by a school psychologist and she felt that the kindergarten round up would provide essentially the same information about her daughter’s limitations. The school insisted on the kindergarten round up and Parent A was certain that the real agenda was to accumulate more data to keep her daughter out of general education.
In another instance, faced with what she perceived as a predetermined outcome of an IEP meeting, Parent B tried to influence the decision by sharing data relative to her daughter’s academic and social progress. At the same time, however, she felt that the group of professionals sitting around the table simply presented the façade of a consultative decision making model. Parent B summed up her perception as follows:

...when you go to an IEP, you’ve got the principal at this end of the table. When she first started, she had two special ed teachers. One’s the lead special ed teacher and the other one was her special ed teacher who was new. That’s why she had the other special ed teacher. You’ve got a speech therapist in there. You’ve got her regular ed teacher. You’ve got all those... You might have a psychologist. All these people at the table and you sit there. You just feel like... looks on their faces... and just kind of how they... even after it’s all worked out they’ve got this whole plan and they’re presenting to us. It’s not a negative experience. It’s just kind of, all worked out and do you really have any say?

Ultimately, the school did insist on placing Parent B’s daughter in a non-inclusive special education program.

When parents feel that a school predetermines the outcomes of meetings, they lose trust in the personnel who are assigned to help their children. Even the icebreaking conversations at the beginning of meetings seem surface and
manipulative. Parents feel ambivalent about being present at those meetings. On one hand, they need to do whatever they can to support their child and, on the other hand, their presence does nothing to influence outcomes.

Resource Allocation

Parents prioritize the safety, education and socialization of their children without regard to the existence of a disability. Parents also express the perception that schools allocate resources in favor of the non-disabled. Several parents shared their recollections of meetings during which school administrators referred to student-teacher ratio or the need for trained staff as factors that affect resource allocation among students. It is of note that one study of the relative costs of inclusion versus pullout programs (Odom, Hanson, Lieber, Marquart, Sandall, Wolery, Horn, Schwartz, Beckman, Hikido, and Chambers, 2001) identified considerable diversity among inclusion programs and recommended that administrators should “identify costs within their own programs to inform decision making about budgeting and resource allocation.” (p.51). In this study, no parent recalled hearing about any such in-house research.

Notwithstanding research issues, parents assess the success of educational programming by gauging alignment between school priorities and children’s needs. When parents were dissatisfied with a school, they felt that this alignment was off. These parents articulate the perspective that their children’s schools spend limited resources preferentially on general education populations.
Parent K has twins, one of whom is affected by autism. Her son’s autism was medically diagnosed early on following a significant medical incident. However, the medical and educational diagnoses of autism differ in certain details and can be applied independently of one another. Additionally, different personnel are involved in each diagnosis. Parent K wanted the school to provide an Autistic Consultant for her child. By withholding an educational Autistic Impaired (AI) diagnosis, the school could argue that there was no need for that consultant. The school’s refusal to offer an AI diagnosis initiated several years of conflict between Parent K and the school.

Parent K believed that the school would not offer the AI diagnosis because it did not want to pay for an AI consultant on its staff. In her view, the school felt that its limited budget would be better spent on the non-disabled population. Parent K tried to encourage the school to offer that resource. She relates that, “So then, three years went by, and he (my son) went to kindergarten, first, second (grades), and really kind of looking, you know, the therapy was pretty much the same. We wanted an Autism teacher consultant to follow him and at that time in the community that we lived in there wasn’t anybody that was on staff.”

Parent K finally prevailed after inviting in advocates and the state autism association. Unfortunately, the years spent without access to appropriate services could not be regained in terms of educational, social and developmental progress for her child.

Parent A also felt that her daughter’s school was prioritizing the needs of general education students over her daughter’s needs. Inclusion in her daughter’s
school meant that children could be placed in a general education classroom but would receive much less academic support in that setting than in the special education classroom. In effect, the school forced parents to choose between the advantages of inclusion without academic support or academic support in a non-inclusive setting. She remembers that during the IEP meeting “it was said to me a few times, ‘So, you would rather have social versus academic for her?’ And I keep saying, ‘No, I want them to be met equally.’ But at that time I had to say, ‘OK, yeah, I’d rather have social if you guys can’t meet her academic needs – then, yeah, I think I would rather have social.’

Parent N believes that schools rearrange their priorities to avoid legal troubles as well as to save money. She observes that, “at that level, administratively, I think there’s a lot of tip toeing around things because of concerns that someone’s going to file a law suit. Or file a complaint.” She goes on to explain that, due to this excessive interest in following the letter of the law, children’s real needs are often put second.

Beyond the context of administrative decisions to limit academic resources in inclusionary settings, some general education teachers feel that it is not their job to educate special needs children. Those teachers believe that their primary responsibility is to the general education children who make up the majority of their classes. The situation becomes more problematic when general and special education teachers do not work together as a team. For example, Parent A wanted her daughter to be placed in a general education kindergarten but found that the general education teacher was unresponsive.
The special ed (education) teacher would like to (work with the general education teacher) but at that time she could not. There was just no working together. The (regular education) teacher just wouldn't work with her. She tried a number of times to do a lot of things and he (the general education teacher) just wasn't receptive.

These reflections on competition for school resources position parents within a hegemony that extends beyond the walls of the school. Parents expressed their awareness of legislative and governmental forces whose bureaucratic and economic decisions ultimately affect the lives of children. Parents advocate for their children within the framework of this hegemony.

Criticism as an Exclusionary Tool

Vygotsky's (1978) work identified the difference between what a child can do with help and can do without help as the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). Parents value their children despite imperfections or disabilities and generally want them to accomplish what they are capable of doing. When schools criticize children for their class standing, they demonstrate a value system that favors the non-disabled over the disabled. When they distribute resources based on this valuing system, schools impact a fundamental aspect of parent-child-school relationships.

Several parents in this study felt that their special needs children were unduly criticized. Low grades, notes home, and face-to-face meetings were interpreted as means by which schools communicate criticism. This criticism was not constructive in so far as it did not link to an improvement plan. In fact, parents felt that criticism
was designed to justify withholding resources in schools that compared children by ability levels rather than serve children regardless of ability levels. For these parents, the message from school was that special needs children were not valued as much as the rest of the population because they did not accomplish as much academically. Criticism, communicated through grading, commenting on behaviors and academic skills and diagnosing educationally handicapping conditions, enabled schools to leverage power.

To differing degrees and in differing formats, criticism factored into the remembered experiences of parents in this study. Parent A recalls that her daughter was referred to as “a belligerent pistol. At the age of four, to have your child called a belligerent pistol.” Parent B recalls that the school principal referred to her child as “handicapped” several times during a meeting. Parent D recalls being told by her son’s teacher, “‘ (I) think your child belongs at a school with other kids like him.’ And, um, ‘I think you’re being selfish – just going for what you want – not your child.’”

Parent I was invited to attend the IEP of a friend’s daughter. Her friend’s daughter has Down Syndrome and experiences behavioral challenges related to her disability. Parent I recalls that at that IEP,

I must have heard the word “noncompliant” come out of the school psychologist’s mouth about forty times during this IEP and nobody stopped her. The principal.... What a horrible, horrible experience for this parent. I was just sitting there in disbelief... and it was at one
point, she was just literally shouting at this parent and it was like, it became very personal for her and I didn’t understand that. And, it was like all they did was talk about all the negative things about this child. And I’m like, my God, having to sit there and listen to that as a parent – how horrible.

Parent G believes that criticism is supported by the larger context of funding and the political environment. He feels that schools are under financial pressure associated with “No Child Left Behind” legislation to maximize test scores for children. He believes that his son, who began school as a weak reader, was caught in this conundrum. Told by his son’s principal that, “there’s more requirements but less money,” Parent G observed that, “All of them (school personnel) typically seemed to be defending the system and being committed to doing what they felt they should be doing.” It is this pressure, rather than concern for his son’s educational needs, that Parent G sees as the driving force behind negative reports and educational decisions.

In this study, criticism emerges as behavior on the part of school personnel which is designed to justify withholding resources from children by devaluing them relative to non-disabled children who have stronger academic and social skills. Parents of disabled children are vulnerable to this strategy in so far as they cannot dispute the fact that their children do not perform academically at the same level as non-disabled children. Criticism masks the reluctance of some schools to adhere to legal and philosophical standards of equity among children. Criticism, when not
linked to appropriate intervention plans, is undemocratic and inconsistent with the basic philosophy that supports public education.

In this section, I have explored parent perceptions of their communicative experiences with schools as they relate to their children’s educational experiences. The forming of these perspectives, from the vantage point of Frieire (1998) represent the process of *naming*, a process that is “not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone” (p. 69). This knowing, or *naming* in Freire’s polemic, is a precursor to *praxis*, the connecting of knowledge with action. Based on the critical consciousness that arises out of these perceptions, parents take action to engage the school hegemony. The following section explores parent engagement with the school.

**Parent Engagement with Schools**

Parent participants in this study express the desire to be present in their children’s schools and work with those schools to co-develop strategies appropriate to meeting their children’s educational and social needs. As diverse as parental strategies for engagement are, they universally focus on developing an equitable and inclusive educational culture. The strategies explored in this study include: becoming involved, volunteering as classroom helper; information resources; building a reputation; legalistic engagement; and strategic withdrawal.

**Becoming Involved**

*Involvement* is parent engagement in the institutional hegemony of the school system in all of its forms. Involvement is a function of parental presence as well as
information and power that is derived from that presence. To varying degrees having presence at school enables parents to develop relationships, access information through relationships and, leverage relationships and information to engage decision makers.

When children leave home in the morning to spend six hours away from home, they enter an environment where the school sets rules. These rules instantiate hegemonic relations with both children and families. Parents who are critically conscious may choose to encounter the school hegemony on behalf of their children’s education. Parents in this study understand that involvement gives them power.

Parent M recognized the need to establish a powerful presence in her disabled son’s school. When describing her other children, she observed, “I sign them up for school, like kindergarten orientation, they went in, they did fine. You know, as a parent, I’m involved but I don’t have to be on top of everything that they’re doing.” For her special needs son, however, a great deal more was involved.

I’m at the school every day. Is he doing OK? You know, are things going well? I think it’s a whole different ball game when you have a kid with special needs...There’s a daily notebook that goes back and forth. This is what he’s doing at home; it might affect his behavior at school. This is what he’s doing at school. So when he gets home, you know, you have to have constant communication.
Parent J also recognized that she had to become involved if she wanted her daughter to be successfully included in general education classes at school. Part of her strategy was to be at school as much as possible.

I always go to parent-teacher conferences, always go to open houses, even if we’ve just had an IEP. I’ve never missed an IEP for her – so I’m very involved in (the) classroom. I make calls to the classroom, I contact not only her teacher but there are two parapros in her classroom right now and I’ll talk with them. I know one of her parapros on a personal basis so I’ll – you know, when I see her – in public or at her house I’ll ask her about how (my daughter’s) doing.

Parent F’s autistic son has an ongoing need for support to facilitate his social interaction with other children and adults. Parent F developed a unique strategy to simultaneously involve herself in her son’s school and foster the development of his social skills. She purchased bakery muffins and sent them to school with her son. She asked the aides to bring the muffins around to school personnel in order to involve him in a social activity and develop relationships with school staff. Parent F recalls that, “You know, it was just a simple little idea and the teacher was like, this is so cool. We get treats and he goes around and interacts with everyone. So about once a month I would send stuff and he would do that. And they love it.”

Parents who involve themselves in their children’s schools become participants in inclusion. These parents have developed numerous ways to promote
involvement including volunteering, acting as information resources and building a reputation.

**Volunteering as Classroom Helper**

To include themselves in the life of the school, some parents position themselves as classroom assistants or in other helping roles. By so doing, they gain a vantage point from which to observe the interaction between school and child on a daily basis. In some instances, volunteering also establishes a *quid pro quo* through which parent services are exchanged for educational services for a special needs child.

Parent C was motivated to become a classroom volunteer so that she could support her daughter in school. Her daughter’s physical disability made it unsafe for her to be bumped or jostled by other children. While Parent C was satisfied with the school’s academic program, she was critical of its overly protective attitude. The school’s attitude contrasted with her parenting philosophy which supported exposing her daughter to risk in order to teach her to manage risk. When Parent C attended an IEP meeting to discuss her daughter’s placement, she was confronted by a defensive attitude on the part of the school principal. Her impression was that the principal was thinking, “Oh my God, the kid’s going to die. You know, she’s going to get pushed on in the hallway and we’re going to get sued.”

Parent C recalled a lot of discussion about the danger associated with the playground. The principal felt that the kindergarten playground had been safer but that the larger playground, meant for all of the grades, was more active and those
children were more subject to being jostled. Parent C’s child, now a first grader, would be assigned to the larger playground. Parent C and her husband felt that the principal was concerned about the possibility of a lawsuit. They felt that “This was about treating a child fairly. If she’s going to fall down, she’s going to fall down.”

In order to insure that her child would be treated like any other child would be treated, Parent C volunteered as a classroom helper. Her reasoning follows,

And for me, I certainly am more apprehensive (about how the school would treat my daughter) so what I did different was I started volunteering at school every week. So I was in that classroom every week seeing how she was treated. I was helping the teacher by the way. But, you know, monitoring how she was treated. So, it just got me involved. We still have a good relationship with every teacher.

As described earlier, Parent K enlisted the aid of an advocate and the state autism association to insure a quality education for her autistic son. In addition to her work with advocates, Parent K felt that getting to know the personalities at school would enhance her position vis a vie obtaining an educational diagnosis of AI. She joined the PTA and became a parent volunteer. She remarked that, “if you’re a parent that’s involved in school, (you will) see those people that go the extra mile... you know the people who are approachable in that room.” Parent K feels that her participation with the school serves to enhance her communication with school personnel. “But, if I wasn’t (a parent volunteer) I don’t think there would be as much communication unless you’re involved.”
Schools are helped by parent volunteers. Parent volunteers provide one on one reading help, assist on field trips and so on. While there is no contract ensuring that the children of parent volunteers will receive preferential service, parents were clear about the benefits of volunteering to maximize their children’s educational programs. They felt that volunteering provided them with a vantage point from which to observe their children’s education on a daily basis as well as leverage a certain amount of power within the system.

**Acting as Information Resource**

The inclusion of disabled children in mainstream classrooms challenges educators’ knowledge about conditions that often affect relatively few children. Frequently parents, who have been educating themselves about their child’s disability for several years can be valuable resources for teachers. These parents have developed personal knowledge that may include technical, experiential and personal information that uniquely positions parents to help their child’s teacher. This personal knowledge also challenges those parents position themselves in ways that do not threaten a teacher’s status. Those parents who shared information with their child’s teacher found that they needed to be socially skilled so as not to be perceived as being pushy. The risk of exposing the teacher’s lack of knowledge exists in tension with the opportunity for parent and teacher to share information and create a more positive outcome for all.

Parent O’s son had a kindergarten teacher who was quite knowledgeable about autism. As a result, things went relatively smoothly during that year. Parent O
also absorbed a great deal of information about autism through her relationship with her son’s teacher. Parent O said that “we’d (me and the teacher) figure out how to accommodate things.” Fortunately for Parent O, she also developed a good working relationship with her son’s aide who then transitioned with her son from kindergarten to first grade.

Parent O’s relationship with her son’s kindergarten teacher helped her to accumulate knowledge that could benefit the first grade teacher. When it became apparent that her son’s first grade teacher was not knowledgeable about autism, Parent O used her knowledge to influence his educational programming. Her relationship with the aide was a valuable asset. Parent O drew upon that relationship to convey information about effective interventions for autistic children to the new teacher and indirectly influence her son’s education. She said, “Me and the aide would write back and forth or call – and work out accommodations.”

Parent H felt that knowledge of her daughter’s needs was not enough. Her child was born with significant medical needs and was diagnosed educationally as Other Health Impaired (OHI). Parent H felt comfortable with her own understanding of her daughter’s condition but, because of her daughter’s unique needs, Parent H wanted to ensure that she would receive an appropriate educational program. She wanted to effectively share disability related information with the IEP team. She began her campaign of connecting with her daughter’s teacher and the IEP team by educating herself on the IEP process. A few months before a meeting she read books on the subject of IEPs and, based on what she had read, communicated with school
personnel. Several teachers and administrators would be present at the IEP meeting—coming from two different school districts. Parent H felt that she could promote her ideas most effectively if all of those personnel were informed about her daughter’s needs prior to the meeting.

Parent H personalized the information that she shared with the school by putting together a scrap book. In the scrapbook, she included information about her entire family as well as specific information about her daughter’s strengths, challenges and interests. She felt that her effort was reciprocated when the special education teacher made up her own scrapbook that included pictures of the teachers, principal, custodian and art teacher as a way of familiarizing her daughter with the school.

Educating children who have disabilities requires specific knowledge to meet the needs of those children. This knowledge can be of two kinds: first professional knowledge related to a disabling condition and, second, knowledge of the personal and family dynamics of a child. Parents frequently have accumulated a good deal of information specific to both their child’s personality and disability that teachers don’t have. By sharing their expertise, parents establish a degree of power and influence as they support teachers in developing appropriate educational programs.

Building a Reputation

As they become involved in their children’s schools, parents become known beyond the child’s specific teacher, to the larger school community. Some parents expressed the belief that certain kinds of reputations are valuable in terms of
influencing the school community. For example, some parents claim to enjoy speedier and more positive responses to their requests for years after they demonstrated strong advocacy roles.

Parents also expressed their awareness of the thin line between an advocacy role and a pushy parent role. Both of these roles are present in the experience of Parent G. Parent G’s wife informed him that teachers find it hard to talk with him. He felt all right about this and explained as follows:

Well, my wife says I scare the hell out of them. (She tells me that) ‘When you walk into the room.’ You know, cause she’s attended a couple of meetings by herself because I was out of town and she said it was totally different when you were there. That might be because I’m a little more assertive than my wife and a little more knowledgeable that she. But she is easily swayed. And I’m not. Because I understand, I think, some of the things that are going on. And I know my son. When I fashion my argument, I fashion it around my knowledge of him. What he can do and what he can’t do. And what I see him doing for us that he’s probably not doing for his teachers. I think that they’re not so much intimidated by my presence or my being as they are by being pressured to meet these standards. That is at all levels of the school system. Particularly the teachers are really under the gun.

For several parents, the felt need to establish a certain reputation in the school necessitated deep self-reflection and change. For Parent B, the process of establishing
a reputation was an inner journey as well as an outer journey. As a special education teacher herself, Parent B shared something of the inner conflict and stress that she experienced as she engaged the school on behalf of her daughter. Parent B enters meetings with preconceptions of school administrators that have developed through her career as an educator. She described administrators as, “the higher beings. And you felt that you had to go in and fight and prove every little detail to get your point across to them because ultimately they make the final decision.” Needing to represent the educational needs of her daughter, Parent B feels that she must marshal her resources before entering a meeting. This includes gathering data and steeling herself emotionally. Even when she thinks that things will go well, she still has a feeling of tension. “I’m nervous when I go because you never know if there’s something around the corner that they’re going to hit us with.” Perhaps in part as a result of her insecurities, Parent B feels the need to be perceived as a parent to be reckoned with. She and her husband work hard to not let anything get past them as they relate to school personnel.

Parent B felt that by establishing a reputation as an advocate she had developed a degree of power in the school. When she received negative comments about her daughter from a paraprofessional who worked with her daughter’s teacher, she wrote to the teacher and got a very quick and positive response. Parent B attributes this response to her reputation. For Parent B, this response was a confirmation of her belief that her daughter’s teacher would rather respond quickly to her request than have to deal with her rampage.
Parent L reflected on her own childhood as she shared something of the inner journey that accompanied her drive to establish a reputation with her child's school. She told me that she didn't care for school because she was very "shy and reserved." When she became disappointed with the "chilly" reception that her autistic son received in school, however, she realized that she needed to overcome that persona. As Parent L worked to bridge the distance between herself and her son's teachers, her growth was noted by her friends. "People who know me now versus a couple of years ago notice a lot that I'm not the same person......I'm looking for a better reception – to be able to walk in and not worry about what they're thinking."

While the establishment of a reputation, whether positive or negative, is the unavoidable outcome of any engagement in a community, these parent interviews indicate the amount of intention that parents put into establishing their reputations. When interpersonal techniques failed to bring about desired results, however, parents drew on other techniques for engagement.

Legalistic Engagement

Since the passage of Federal Law 94-142 in the mid-1970s and, more recently, IDEA (Etscheidt, 2006) special education has evolved as a legal as well as an educational system. Under special education law, children with disabilities receive certain protections that are not applicable to their general education peers. For example, the scope of these protections in the area of discipline includes law which governs the handling of discipline, prevention of discipline problems, interference with class activities, removal from programs, services for students who are removed
or suspended, functional behavioral assessments and behavioral intervention plans, student placement, and disciplinary procedures that can be used to address dangerous behavior, drugs or weapons (Walsh, Smith and Taylor, 2001).

Recently the Federal Government passed No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation that focuses on academic progress of the general education population and requires school districts to increase their support of this population (Standerfer, 2006). The passage of both special and general education law sets up a unique tension in the schools as districts try to reconcile their efforts to meet children’s needs with legislative mandate. Parents recognize the impact of legislation on their children and, when they feel it is necessary, resort to invoking the law.

Legislation positions schools legally, politically and financially to pursue goals that may be at odds with goals that are meaningful to parents. Within the legislative context, schools respond to multiple pressures that may not always be consistent with the interests of children. Parents assume an advocacy posture to ensure that their children’s needs are met in conformity with, or at times despite, legislation. Parent G sees multiple pressures at work in his son’s school. He feels that the No Child Left Behind legislation has placed schools under enormous pressure – pressure which is also felt by his son. He adds, “I don’t think that’s a healthy environment to be educating kids in.” Unfortunately, Parent G also feels that the pressure on schools has moved them into a posture that differs from his parenting goals. He explains, “My job, my responsibility as a parent of my son is not to see that he grows up to be the smartest person on the face of the planet. It’s to see that he
grows up happy, healthy, wise, content with who he is as a person. Not, 'I don’t know how to read.' I don’t want him to have that kind of a complex. OK. So, it’s my job, it’s my wife’s job.”

Some parents observed that schools may feel an unspoken threat of a law suit when parents discuss their children’s needs. Parent C tried to take the threat of a law suit off the table in order for their school to more openly discuss issues pertaining to their child. As mentioned earlier, Parents C’s daughter’s health problems make her vulnerable in the normal traffic flow in hallways. Wanting to encourage the school to treat her as any other child, her father told the school that he would not sue them. He then explained that he has always been skeptical of the motives of the school. He did not want the school to focus on potential liability should his daughter be injured. Instead, he wants the school to focus on his daughter’s need to develop a healthy, engaging relationship with society. For Parent C, “This was about treating a child fairly. If she’s going to fall down, she’s going to fall down. There’s nothing to be overly upset about.”

When parents wish to challenge decisions that schools makes in IEPs, they have access to remedies such as mediation and arbitration. Parent A is the only parent in this study who actually brought an issue to mediation. When her daughter went from preschool into kindergarten, “because they said they didn’t have the proper support there”, the district insisted on enrolling her in a school other than the geographically closer one attended by the children of family and friends. Consistent with the principle of inclusion, Parent A wanted her daughter to be included with
general education and go to school with the children of family and friends. She “felt it would be good for her to be around children she knew.” as these are the people who she would grow up being around.

The district argued that Parent A’s preferred school did not have sufficient special education resources. Maintaining that her priority was for her daughter to learn social skills, she reflected that, “I don’t think they (the school) give a rap about her social skills… I keep telling them, you know, it’ll benefit all the other children as well. Just to give them that sense of, you know, ‘What if I were that way?’”

An IEP meeting was scheduled to discuss the placement. Her daughter had just been evaluated by a school psychologist who had amply demonstrated the degree of her delay. The school insisted, however, that she attend a kindergarten round-up for further testing. Since Parent A saw socialization, not academics, as the issue, she felt that the school was trying to accumulate more evidence of her daughter’s delay simply to justify its placement decision. When the school would not back away from its demand, she observed that, “You know. At that point I rolled my eyes because I told them already I really don’t want to hear that she didn’t – that she wasn’t – I didn’t want to hear what she wasn’t doing.”

Parent A was pressured to sign the school’s draft of the IEP. “During the IEP meeting (garbled) the special ed director writes where she needs to go – where she needs to go and then asks if everybody agrees. Everybody says, “Yeah, we agree.” And they say, “What about you?” They already knew I didn’t agree. So, she says I have to go with the majority of the people here.” It was at this point that Parent A had
no other options. Either go along with the special education director or take her dispute to mediation.

According to special education law, the parent can veto the majority of voices at an IEP. Special education is, after all, *special*. When parents send their children to school, there is an implied consent that those children will be treated according to a universally applied set of standards. When children have special needs, parent consent is needed so that the school can treat those children according to a different set of standards than those that apply to the majority. Parent A was not afforded this option at her IEP meeting. She, accompanied by an advocate, was well aware of her rights. For her, there was no alternative than to ask for mediation as the tool of last resort. “I felt like there was some hope that somebody would listen to me. But it was scary because I’ve never done that before. But, there’s always some hope that somebody will hear my side and agree with me.”

Often, people resort to legal remedies when consensus fails. In mediation the power to decide is removed from both the school and the parent and given to a third party (Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE), 2001). While resorting to legal remedies is relatively rare, it has been my observation as a professional working in the field of special education that the question “What if this goes to court?” is frequently asked among administrators and teachers when IEP decisions are discussed. For the school, mediation means not only giving up decision making power to a third party, it means spending a significant amount of money. For Parent A, “it was scary because I’ve never done that before.”
The final outcome for Parent A was a compromise solution. Her daughter attended the school chosen by the school district with a program focused more on socialization.

Legal remedies are expensive and turn matters over to a higher authority to determine the outcome of a dispute. In so doing, parent and school not only receive a resolution for their particular dispute, but are also provided with guidance for managing similar disputes in the future. The desire to limit expenditures of time and money serve as motivators for schools to limit the number of disputes that go to legal remedies. Unfortunately, as many parents have found, legal remedies are not always the remedies that they had hoped for and frequently extract large investments of time and energy.

**Strategic Withdrawal**

No matter what strategy is employed, engagement draws on resources such as time availability, social skills and financial means. Although parents in this study appear to have a good deal of social and economic capital, it still requires energy to expend that capital. Parents, even higher social and economic level parents, have multiple demands on their time and resources. Further, many parents of disabled children expend energy acquiring medical care, going to different therapies and so on. Given the nature of their problems with the school as well as this drain on resources, at times parents choose to back away from an engagement.

Strategic withdrawal involves leaving the engagement. For some parents withdrawal could be accomplished in their own school district. For others, withdrawal
necessitated literally withdrawing their child from school and/or moving to a new
district. Withdrawal involves the recognition that not all goals are attainable and that
some are more important than others. Parent B, whose situation was described earlier,
provided this summary: “In hindsight, we had many things going on in our lives, we
had many stressors going on personally, in hindsight I probably would have fought it
but I had just too much on my plate.”

Other parents who withdraw feel that they need to back away from one
confrontation to win another. For example, due to Parent D’s kindergarten son’s
medical problem, the school claimed that he couldn’t ride the school bus. He needed
an aide with him and “there was something in the language of the liability insurance
for the school buses so that they couldn’t have other adults ride the bus.” Parent D felt
that, by backing away from the issue, she preserved her most important goal - a
positive climate with the school. Ultimately, she believes, nurturing a positive
climate contributed to winning her battle. She contextualized her withdrawal from the
fray as part of a larger negotiation. Parent D felt vindicated when, at the end of the
first grade, her son’s teacher said, “How come this kid can’t ride the bus?”

Another bus incident affected the life of Parent N’s son. Parent N’s son has
Fragile X Syndrome. Despite it being a five minute car ride from school, her son was
on the bus for one hour on the trip home. When he was sixteen, her son developed a
stomach problem towards the end of the school year and needed to be always close to
a rest room. Parent N called the special education supervisor to request special
transportation for the remaining month of the school year. After multiple emails and
phone calls to the supervisor, it became apparent that her son’s need would not be met. Parent N felt that she could have fought but, “(me and my husband) kind of talked about it and there was only a month left of school. It was one of those pick your battle situations.”

Parent L felt fortunate because her rural school offered what she thought was a very good program for her autistic son. When he was ten, however, she was told that he was too old for that program. This disturbed Parent L. The school proposed to bus him for one year to another town which did not offer autistic programming and then switch him to another town for middle and high school. Parent L was frustrated but believed that she could not negotiate with the school. The administrator asked Parent L to view alternate programs. Parent L agreed, at the IEP meeting, to view those programs. She explained, “So I agreed knowing all the time that I was going to go home and call my husband and say, ‘We’re moving.’ I heard of this program a couple of years ago but we still had a couple of years in (my community). And we live here. I mean, we’ve lived here for ten and a half years. And, we like the community here. We didn’t want to move. But, when I came home and told my husband we had to move – we had to go”

Parent L also spoke with the superintendent of the school district. She recalls that discussion as follows:

I was talking to him – I found that so frustrating I told him – I said that what I’ve found through this process is that none of you care about the kids. It’s just you’ve moved up in position and pay. And he said, ‘I
don’t agree.’ And I said, ‘I’m sorry but I don’t agree with you.’ And again (I) started crying on the phone and said, ‘You know, you guys have won, we’re moving.’ So I don’t think it’s fair’…”You know, I told him, I don’t think it’s fair either just because, you know, (my son) is never going to grow up with a college education and contribute to the community – that’s how it feels. I mean, in general, special ed kids don’t go. That’s just how I feel.

Parent J’s daughter attended school in a large district. The program that was offered to her daughter was curriculum based rather than objective based. In a curriculum based program, the special needs student may receive accommodations and extra instruction, but is responsible to the same curricular demands as the rest of the students. In an objective based program, however, the special needs student is responsible to certain objectives that are designed to be consistent with her academic potential.

Students who are included in a curriculum based program take courses required for a regular high school diploma such as economics and geometry. As her daughter progressed through school, Parent J became convinced that the curriculum based program was not meeting her daughter’s real academic needs, even though she was included in general education classrooms. In fact, the curriculum based program was limiting her daughter’s progress since it did not offer the flexibility that her daughter needed to engage in class work. According to Parent J, her daughter was able to decode words but did not comprehend the material.
When her daughter was in elementary school (her daughter is now seventeen years old), despite being a special educator herself, Parent J describes herself as having been “extremely naïve about inclusive education.” In hindsight, however, she reflects that all school districts do inclusive education differently. At the time she simply trusted the school. She thought, “Well maybe this is the way it’s supposed to be.”

Parent J spoke with the director of special education director. This became a useless discussion in which neither side would yield. Parent J finally saw no option but to move to a neighboring community that did offer the objective based curriculum that she felt her daughter needed. She left frustrated, not only by the school’s inflexibility, but by school personnel not valuing her perspective as her daughter’s mother.

Parents go to remarkable lengths in trying to secure a positive educational climate for their children. There appears, however, to be a pattern. Parents prefer to resolve issues through straightforward communication but, when that fails, they adopt other strategies. Ultimately some parents demonstrate the resolve of actually moving to another community in order to secure educational goals on behalf of their children.

Meta-Themes of Parent School Communication

This study explores hegemonic relationships among parents and schools by centralizing parent perceptions of those relationships. These relationships reflect meta-themes of content that are characteristic of these negotiations. These meta-themes include: Bureaucracy–Community; Inclusion-Exclusion; and Professional
Knowledge-Personal Knowledge. A brief review of the literature precedes the meta-themes to contextualize the voice of parents within hegemony and critical theory.

In this study, interviews are deconstructed from the perspective of the critical modernist paradigm. Critical theory is rooted in Gramsci’s notion of hegemony (Fontana, 1993) which describes the centrality of oppression within relationships among organizations and stakeholders. In these relationships, reality is created and recreated as power is redistributed. Gramsci moved away from Marxist orthodoxy by linking power to the determination of meaning. For Gramsci, hegemony was a response to “contemporary interpretations of Marxism which he criticized as mechanistic and deterministic” (Fontana, 1993, p. 1). In so doing, Gramsci anticipated the “emergence of the popular masses as a sociopolitical and sociocultural force” (p. 8). He reframed the Marxist paradigm of oppression - competition between labor and capital - and established a basis for understanding that power is negotiated within micro-level interactions. In his analysis of the critical modernist paradigm, Mumby casts organizations as “discursive sites where meaning and identity are the products of underlying relations of power” (1997, p.12). According to Mumby, (2001, p. 601), critical theorists conceptualize power “primarily as a struggle over meaning.”

Schools are bureaucracies in which parents and personnel engage one another over the ownership of meaning and power. Negotiations between parents and personnel occur at the micro-level but are immersed in the macro-level realities of the school, the educational establishment and the larger society. Parents desire not only isolated acts and decisions on behalf of their children, but desire to change the reality
of the school. They desire deep change in the school’s relationships with children and families by reframing the purpose of education to include the principle of inclusion - to adopt educational philosophy and practice that is inclusive rather than exclusive. They hope that decisions pertaining to classroom placement, busing, participation in activities, and so on will flow naturally from the school’s philosophical stance and not have to be constantly renegotiated as each instance of arises.

Parent N noted that “schools are set up to think en masse.” From his perspective, the guidelines and rules that schools follow are designed to manage groups of children and families. Parent N describes the thinking of schools as ill suited to address the individual needs of children who are different from other children. These needs are not met when schools are philosophically oriented to address the masses.

Friere describes the oppressed as those “who have adapted to the structure of domination in which they are immersed, and have become resigned to it” (p. 29). He describes their condition as living in the “duality in which to be is to be like, and to be like is to be like the oppressor” (p.30). The oppressed desire authentic freedom but fear it. The oppressor exists not only as an external reality, but also as a consciousness which they have internalized. Several parents in this study recalled having absorbed the myth of a benevolent and supportive school system in their childhood. As children, these parents were successful in school both academically and socially. They did not engage the oppressive egoism of the school “cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism” (p.36).
Several parents also expressed positive comments regarding their children’s experiences during the preschool years. During those years they participated in programs developed exclusively for the disabled. When their children came of kindergarten age, however, parents wanted their children included in classes with other non-disabled children. At this point, some of their children were excluded. In these instances, schools exercised their power by valuing exclusion over inclusion. For parents of these excluded children, this moment often gave birth to critical consciousness.

For Friere, the “pedagogy of the oppressed” (p.36), the raising of critical consciousness, has two stages.

In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation.

Critical consciousness does not exist as a detached, academic condition. Human beings, according to Friere, “are aware of themselves and thus of the world – because they are conscious beings – exist(ing) in a dialectical relationship between the determination of limits and their own freedom” (p. 80). For change - creation and recreation - to occur, the oppressed must be convinced of the authenticity and necessity of their struggle. They must “intervene critically in the situation which surrounds them and whose mark they bear” (p. 49).
In this deconstruction of hegemony, it becomes apparent that decisions are arrived at based on information and values which exist in a particular moment. This moment may have occurred at an IEP meeting, at a meeting in an office or in the classroom or at a chance meeting in a hallway. This project attempts to deconstruct the myriad of attitudes, processes, procedures, and perceptions that affect the outcome of meetings.

This study is about understanding what actually occurs in the moment that parents and schools engage to resolve a difference and decide on an action. Each moment has the potential to result in engagement or encounter. When engagement occurs, the parties attempt to leverage one another through subtle or more direct exercise of power. When encounter occurs, the parties find resolution at a deep level. This experience is dialogical and conducive to relationships that are essential for community. This perspective is consistent with Friere’s analysis of the prerequisites of dialogue. He posits that dialogue cannot exist without love, faith and humility. Friere wrote that “If I do not love the world – if I do not love life – if I do not love people – I cannot enter into dialogue” (1998, p. 71).

Most meetings are characterized by engagement. Participants enter a meeting with fears and preconceptions that are not put aside during the engagement. The conditions that Freire describes as necessary for dialogue - love, faith and humility - are not present to mitigate the fears and agendas that exist in each party’s mind. The parties are stuck in hegemony as the result of the thoughts and actions of one or both of them. The reluctance to let go of agenda and fear ultimately determines the
outcome of a meeting. Without encounter, the parent can only look forward to years more of engagements as their child grows older. The school simply does what it has always done and rests comfortably in its own oppressive egoism - "cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism" (Friere, 1998, p. 36).

As referenced earlier, Buber (1970) describes the two domains of human experience that occur between actors as I-It and I-You. The I-You encounter not only affects the outcome of a particular moment, but it builds community or communion with. Buber (1970) observed that, "All actual life is encounter" (p. 62). One cannot avoid the obvious relationship between community and inclusion. The significance, then, of the content of the moment goes far beyond the outcome of a particular meeting and affects the climate of the school. A moment of encounter changes the reality of the school beyond the outcome of the meeting and beyond the actors who are present at a meeting.

As parents entrust their children to the school for six or seven hours daily, issues of trust are bound to arise. The critical modernist paradigm provides a window through which to deconstruct these complex relationships. The view through this window provides not only insight into parent school relationships, but also acts as an agent of emancipation, ultimately freeing both parent and school to meet in a moment of encounter.

In the process of deconstructing these negotiations of power, three broad meta-themes emerged – ideology– authenticity, inclusion-exclusion, and professional
knowledge-personal knowledge. These themes occurred recurrently in parent interviews as both the content and the theme of power negotiations.

Bureaucracy - Community

Parent remembrances reveal tensions related to inconsistencies of meaning between bureaucratic and community ideologies. These tensions manifest themselves in a confusing hegemonic landscape. This section deconstructs that landscape as well as the tensions which exist in the context of bureaucratic and community ideologies.

Bureaucracy as Ideology

In their description of traditional bureaucratic organizations, Martin, Knopoff and Beckman (1998, p. 459) include formalized and specialized division of labor, employment based on expertise, segregation of jobs by gender, authoritarian leadership style, direct control, centralized decision making at high levels, competitive corporate culture, work behavior determined by impersonal rules, private life separate from work activity and discouragement of emotional expression as characteristics that are shared among traditional bureaucracies. These characteristics of bureaucratic administration reflect and promote basic values of bureaucratic ideology. These values are inherent in Weber’s (1978) assertion that bureaucratic organization is technically superior over other forms of administration. For Weber, this superiority is reflected in values such as “precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs” (p. 973).
Bureaucracy, then, values an inherently mechanistic way of ordering organization. Dehumanization is valued over humanization, emotional expression is anathema and private life is left at home all so that the machine will function smoothly. More than anything else, bureaucratic ideology values efficiency in getting things done. Without the expression of emotion, the organization is free to concentrate on getting a job done without needing to consider value laden issues such as what is being done or why is it being done. Just like a well oiled machine, bureaucracy is as capable of doing evil as good. Without valuing an act as constructive or destructive, the bureaucracy can value only efficiency in carrying out the task.

Community as Ideology

Values such as dehumanization and efficiency are characteristics of bureaucratic ideology which differ inherently from values of community ideology. Unlike the definition of bureaucracy, which has remained essentially unchanged since Weber’s work in the 1940s and 1950s, scholars continue to identify characteristics of community. In fact, Underwood and Frey (2007) submit that “Community comprises one of the most overused terms employed in contemporary discourse by scholars, practitioners, and general public alike” (p. 370). The authors expound that community describes physical, virtual, perceptual, interpersonal and symbolic phenomena. People view community as a noun, an adjective and an adverb.
Ubiquitousness, however, speaks to the need which people have for the hard to define but real promise of community – promise that is absent in bureaucracy. Rather than noun, adjective or adverb, I speak of community as evolving ideology.

A feminist model of organizational ideology lends insight into community as ideological place. From this perspective, communities have in common that they devalue centralized decision making and value collaboration, devalue secrecy and value openness and transparency, devalue isolation and value connectivity, devalue hierarchy and value egalitarian relationships of authority, devalue direct control and value unobtrusive control through internalized values (Martin, Knopoff, and Beckman, 1998).

Taaffe (1995, p. 383) observes that “The dynamics of authenticity is social.” He explains that people do not know themselves in isolation. Community, authentic association with others, must be sustained by caring and “failure to make our inner heart a working agenda in our community life – whether through fear, hypocrisy, or avarice – indicates a condition of alienation” (p. 384).

Underwood and Frey (2007) refer to various attributes of community which include physical, support, influence, and meaning-making. For parent participants in this study, meaning-making represents a key attribute of community as they strive to negotiate meaning with schools in a communicative format.
Tensions between the Enactment of Bureaucratic Ideology and the Desire for Community

Numerous tensions between bureaucratic and community ideologies arise as parents engage the school. Tensions arise as parents react to authoritarian leadership style and direct control; secrecy and centralized decision making; and separation of private life from work activity.

Parent participants were keenly aware of authoritarian leadership style and direct control at IEP and other meetings which build tensions between bureaucratic and community ideology. Authoritarian leadership manifests itself in decisions which are decided upon prior to ostensibly democratic meetings. Parents are aware of this dynamic but, given the distribution of power, are not positioned to challenge it directly. Aware of this tension, Parent B described an IEP meeting as follows,

All these people at the table and you sit there. You just feel like... looks on their faces... and just kind of how they... even after it’s all worked out they’ve got this whole plan and they’re presenting to us. It’s not a negative experience. It’s just kind of, all worked out and do you really have any say?

Unfortunately for parent participants in this study, the secrecy and centralized decision making, characteristic of bureaucratic leadership, is anathema to the acceptance of the more inclusive ideology which they desire for their children. For example, Parent F expected to be included in a meeting that would determine her son’s class placement. In response to being left out of the meeting, she chose to send email messages to the meeting participants, a strategy that would not directly confront
the decision makers who would decide her child’s placement. Parent F was “shocked” when her son was placed in an inclusive classroom setting made her “feel confident that this was the best place and they were going to take him in and that he wouldn’t be any different than any other kid in that school.” In Parent F’s perception, her decision not to directly confront school personnel, but choose another communicative strategy, met with success.

Parent O also found a way to communicate with the school short of confrontation. Parent O was able to form a relationship with her son’s teacher assistant during his kindergarten year. Fortunately, this aide moved to first grade with her son. The first grade teacher was not familiar with her son’s disability, but, her relationship with the aide formed a communicative link with the teacher and they were able to “figure out how to accommodate things.” When parents are not successful at building communicative solutions to negotiate meaning, they often feel powerless and frustrated as did Parent L who commented that “You know you’re not going to get anywhere. I know I’m not going to get it – so what’s the point in going? But who’s going to fight for him if you don’t.”

Confrontation breaks down, rather than builds community. Parents in this study were reluctant to adopt a confrontational stance with school personnel in part because it would risk what sense of community exists.

The enforced separation of private life from work activity also contributes in no small way to the tension which parents associate with their negotiations with schools. Bureaucratic ideology defends this separation as necessary to increase
efficient functioning. For a parent, however, a child is both private and public life. There is no separation. When schools value separation in practice, they contribute to its accompanying tension. Parents arrive at school with their most personal issue – their children - and are not inclined to leave that issue at the door. Parent E drew on a graphic metaphor of the brown rug to describe her school’s attempt to separate itself from her personal involvement. She said,

I’ve always been the parent who walked my kids into school. I don’t care what my job is – my primary job is a mom”... “I try to say, ‘Hello.’ Establish a relationship... But this particular teacher just couldn’t stand it. He hated me being in the vicinity. And the principal didn’t support that. He wanted all the parents to remain on the brown rug... At the front of the door there’s this huge, you know, commercial (carpet). ‘Stay on the brown rug!’ Which to me, you know, unfortunately ... means to me do not stay on the brown rug. So I never stayed on the brown rug. But I always walked them in.

Weber (1978) wrote that, “bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is ‘dehumanized,’ the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation” (p. 975). The sense that her feelings were being ignored was very strong in the comments of Parent A. Parent A thought that her child’s needs were not being adequately addressed. She perceived that schools favor high performing children and often ignore special needs children. Expressing her
frustration at not being heard (emotionally), when asked, “How do they do it?” she responded, “They do it unconsciously. They don’t realize it – I don’t think. I don’t think they realize what they’re doing so they can’t change it.”

It is in the honest exploration of issues that the potential for dialogue and praxis resides. In order to really come together in decisions of placement and service delivery, schools and parents need to join private life and work life in order to define what the child is. For the parent, this means being vulnerable and open about deep issues such as her desires for her child’s future, her worries, and her family and so on. Schools may also feel vulnerable. For example, for the school, vulnerability may relates to how it negotiates the realities of being an organization and how staff really feels in terms of the school’s bias and fears.

Love and bureaucratic ideology are not compatible. Traditional bureaucratic ideology does not connect people at the heart. It gathers members based on their production, qualification and training and separates those who try to incorporate personal meaning based on emotional expression and personal life. This position isolates and excludes special needs children who do not being qualification and training to the organization. By including members conditionally, bureaucratic ideology is intrinsically exclusionary and antithetical to community ideology. Weber (1978) identified tensions between bureaucracy and democracy. He writes that “Under certain conditions, democracy creates palpable breaks in the bureaucratic pattern and impediments to bureaucratic organization” (p. 991). This vulnerability to
diversity in democratic thought is also present in vulnerability to diversity and lack of bureaucratically valued meaning in children’s lives.

Community and bureaucracy represent profoundly different ideological views of what people are and what children are. These differences exist at the core of parent school negotiations. Parents want children to be connected as members of community. This motivates them to be vulnerable enough to volunteer time as classroom assistants or bake muffins for school staff. When parents connect in a heartfelt manner with teachers and administrators, their children are protected from the seemingly whimsical decisions that are made at school. Parents build community in front of bureaucrats and even with bureaucrats to keep their children safe and connected.

Inclusion-Exclusion

Parent participants in this study think deeply and passionately about inclusion. They want their children not only included in general education classrooms, but also in society. In order to accomplish their goals, parents engage schools hegemonically as they strive to negotiate power and reinvent meaning.

Listening to parents, two very different definitions of inclusion emerge. The first, the definition which parents gravitate towards, is very close, if not identical, to the working definition of community ideology as described in the preceding section. In this definition, disability is unrelated to the acceptance that a child finds in her family, her school or her society. In this definition, the school responds to the child’s disability organically. The child is not segregated because of disability. The child is
included despite disability. The disability represents diversity, not disability. Just as a child would not feel excluded due to hair color, skin color or ethnicity, the child does not feel excluded due to disability. This is the inclusion that parents desire for their children.

To the extent that schools are modeled bureaucratically, however, they tend to define *inclusion* differently. For bureaucratically modeled schools, inclusion is defined by a set of rules and guidelines. For example, a school might develop certain criteria for placement that would allow a child with a disability to be admitted into a classroom composed of children who do not have disabilities. These criteria might relate to intelligence, academic performance or behavioral norms. These criteria might also relate to medical needs or other factors. In this definition, inclusion becomes *conditional* and once inclusion becomes conditional, *exclusion* becomes possible. This definition of inclusion is consistent with bureaucratic ideology – conditional acceptance – rather than with community ideology – unconditional acceptance.

Parent O experienced unconditional acceptance when her son’s teacher told her, “Oh, he’s welcome to come here. If it was my kids (sic) it was what I would do, too.” A parent does not suddenly become an un-parent. The parent-child relationship is not based on the cost of having a child, the availability of other children or the introduction of data and psychometric measurement. Since schools make the rules, however, they expose the vulnerability of parents in the tension between unconditional and conditional acceptance. When expression of vulnerability is
exploited by the school, the result is closed doors. When their vulnerability is nurtured and encouraged in a trusting relationship, tensions are resolved and the door to dialogue and praxis opens.

As mentioned above, schools support exclusionary decisions with a use of data that is consistent with bureaucratic ideology. The data that schools generate when arguing for exclusion generally focuses on quantifiable aspects of children’s performance such as IQ and academic level. They also look at behaviors that are inconsistent with what is expected. This use of data can be overwhelming to parents. Parent I, for example, “heard the word ‘noncompliant’ come out of the school psychologist’s mouth about forty times during the IEP and nobody stopped her.” This use of data did not arise when schools included children. Consistent with the ideology of community, those schools did not need data to justify including children.

Schools also apply conditional acceptance - or exclusion – to justify decisions of resource allocation. For example, some parents let go of some goals so that their children could continue in a particular school. For example, Parent M’s school district claimed that it lacked appropriate resources to educate her son and then switched him to a different district. The issue of resource availability contributes to the argument by some schools that they cannot afford to provide for both the academic and social needs of the disabled. Parent A was reduced by the school to allow that, “I had to say, ‘OK, yeah, I’d rather have social if you guys can’t meet her academic needs – then, yeah, I think I would rather have social.”
Perhaps because they more frequently meet the school’s guidelines for inclusion — conditional acceptance — tensions between inclusion and exclusion do not appear as frequently with regard to non-disabled children. When she described her experiences when entering her non-disabled children in school, Parent M said, “You know, as a parent, I’m involved but I don’t have to be on top of everything that they’re doing.” For her disabled child, however, she felt the need to be in “constant communication.” Her comment offers insight into the vulnerability that Parent M felt when she did not trust the school’s conditional offer of inclusion.

Bureaucracy is organized so that stakeholders will conform to its norms. Special needs children don’t conform. Schools are complex institutions, however, and several parents expressed finding what they needed for their children in their school. In other words, not all schools are alike and not all individuals who work in schools are alike. Some schools and some personnel value inclusion more than others.

For parents, inclusion connotes a vital, moment by moment, lived interest by parents and schools in the lives of children. The inclusive community is embracing and vitally concerned for the welfare of each individual. The relationships of adults to children are characterized by protective and proactive functions rather than by bureaucratic/paternalistic/authoritarian functions. A surface analysis reveals that parents differ with schools over what they (schools) do, deeper analysis of the interviews reveals that parents differ with schools over what they (schools) are. This perception is revealed in the critiques that parents offer. For example, Parent A commented that, “I don’t think they realize what they’re doing so they can’t change
it. They don’t realize that’s happening.” For parents to truly impact the school’s awareness – consciousness – of what it is, however, is an enormous task. As a result, the energy that parents give is more frequently directed at what schools do than what they are. They try to get their child into a particular classroom rather than try to change the weltanschauung of the principal. The status of a child who is born into a family does not have to be tested or discussed. The decision to unconditionally include a child in a school community does not require testing. A decision to exclude a child, however, becomes complex and problematic. In order to make – justify - an exclusionary decision, schools test children and accumulate data and decide whether resources are available. Typically, parents feel torn as they become aware of the exclusionary power of schools and must anguish over choosing strategies which will, in their estimation, best benefit their children.

**Professional Knowledge - Personal Knowledge**

This section addresses the tensions that result from the acquisition, validation and use of professional and personal knowledge. The use of knowledge is fundamental to making decisions such as whether to include children despite disabilities or exclude them due to their disabilities. Different uses of knowledge also reflect fundamentally different beliefs of what school is and what children are. Differing perspectives are grounded in historical attitudinal sets as well as deeply personal belief systems.

Since the beginning of the industrialized age, schools have adapted meaning in response to diverse social and parental interests. Spring (1975, p. 137) notes that
radicals and union leaders realized in the early 1900's that “the school system was becoming the central institution for control by corporate capitalism.” Other interest groups such as the church, government, universities, and so on have varying criteria of what constitutes successful outcomes of education. Carter (1965, p. 11) defines educational institutions as “social interventions used by human groups to perpetuate their commonly accepted goals.” In 1975 Postman argued that “all educational practices are profoundly political in the sense that they are designed to produce one sort of human being rather than another..... this includes everything from the arrangement of seats in a classroom, to the rituals practiced in the auditorium, to the textbooks used in lessons, to the dress that is required of both teachers and students, to the tests given, to the subjects that are taught, and most emphatically, to the intellectual skills that are promoted” (p. 140).

Schools are sensitive to individual, social and political forces and, at least at a surface level, have been able to present different ways of knowing and valuing children such as by publicly endorsing the concept of inclusion. Moreover, professionally trained staff are able to support the position of the school with their status and ability to communicate. Varenne (2007), however, points to the ubiquity of culturally appropriate references in the curriculum of schools of education as a means of masking ideological resistance. Perhaps as a result, parents in this study experienced variability between the public face and actual practice of schools.

Parents whose perspective differs from one offered by the school generally communicate through the use of personal, rather than professional knowledge. They
are confronted by the school’s use of data constitutively to express and defend the reality and mythology of what they are and the use of data instrumentally to defend decisions that may be more the result of what the school is than what the data says. When school demands that, “You must do things this way,” the parent who believes in doing things that way is engaged by power expressed by and hidden in rules and defended both constitutively and instrumentally by professionally supported data.

Since the industrialized age, the professionalization movement has profoundly influenced the meaning of education by differentiating the roles and skills of educators and parents. Recently, for example, No Child Left Behind legislation (Darling, 2006) has reinforced the professionalization movement by adding the highly qualified status to teacher credentials. With her certification, teacher assumes power to evaluate children, decide on appropriate strategies to teach them and participate in the process of labeling children with special needs.

The amount of data has also increased exponentially since the beginning of the industrial age. Increased data is part of what has pressured schools to be more accountable. The pressure for accountability is reflected in literature pertaining to data driven school improvement. Johnson (2000) describes an ideal in which “studying the current abilities, skills, attitudes, and learning styles of students empowers educators to adjust the curriculum to achieve whatever goals the school and district have chosen” (p. 16). This positive notion is balanced by others who take a more pessimistic view of how schools use data. Gillborn (1998) links an increasing focus on standards in British schools to “more extensive inequalities of opportunity
between groups of students positioned in relation to ‘ability’, social class, gender and ethnic origin” (p. 18).

Research notwithstanding, parents in this study struggle to make sense of the school’s use of data. For example, Parent A felt that being asked to have her daughter seen by the school psychologist after she had been tested at the kindergarten round-up felt like a “set up.” Parent A was certain that the data which the school was accumulating only served to mask the previously arrived at decision that her daughter was to be excluded from general education. Faced with these dilemmas, parents have to decide whether to express personal knowledge of what they feel is best for their child or conform to the demand of the school and avoid escalated engagement.

This chapter recounts the recalled experiences of parents who engage schools over decisions that pertain to the education and socialization of their children. These recalled experiences, viewed through the lens of the critical modernist paradigm, reveal both surface and deep realities of the ownership of meaning among parents and schools. When parents engage schools on behalf of their children, they risk entanglement with ideology, exclusionary attitudes, rules, data and personnel which confront their personal knowledge. The critical consciousness that emerges as parents engage in these meetings, however, carries the potential to address issues authentically by dialogue rather than dialectic. According to Friere (1998), dialogue needs an environment of love, faith and humility. It follows that attitude, rather than knowledge either enhances or restricts dialogue between parents and schools.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study has been to centralize the voices of parents in their efforts to negotiate meaningful school experiences for their children. In that effort, day to day micro-level communication activities of parents and school personnel have been deconstructed to reveal the macro-level ideological oppositions of the interactants and the fundamental values surrounding the arrangements of power.

Examination of these recalled experiences identified key issues of concern to parents as well as strategies parents use in the schools to address these concerns. Parents in this study named issues such as inclusion, the school’s awareness of its emotional impact on parents, the school’s tendency to favor general education students, as among the concerns that occupy their direct communication with schools. Strategies parents enact to address these issues include becoming involved, volunteering as classroom helper, information resources, building a reputation, legalistic engagement, and strategic withdrawal.

Analysis of these micro-level interactions then revealed the macro-level ideological tensions present in this hegemonic relationship between parents and school personnel. These tensions include tension between inclusion and exclusion of special needs children, between bureaucratic and community ideologies, and between
professional and personal applications of knowledge. Fundamentally, these tensions represent key points of negotiation of meaning.

At a micro-level, parent-school meetings involve issues such as academic performance and classroom behavior. Parents in this study, however, enter those meetings with more profound expectations toward the development of shared meaning pertaining to including their children as participants in society. As parents experience the tensions that emerge during these meetings, they recognize their involvement in a struggle over meaning and power with schools and school personnel who define and value children differently than parents do and make decisions differently than they would like to see them made. Through these meetings with their moments of engagement, parents have their consciousness awakened and raised. By recalling these experiences for this study, parents share their reading of the world from the vantage point of an oppressed group.

The awakening of consciousness is reflected in changing perceptions of the school as parents recall childhood experiences and compare those experiences with the ones they have as adults. Change of consciousness is also reflected in the personal changes that parents recognize in themselves as they build personal attributes, such as increased assertiveness, in the course of their hegemonic engagements. As members of an oppressed group these parents also become conscious of their vulnerability and their responses to vulnerability such as limiting their expression of emotional content and avoiding confrontation where possible.
Vulnerability is a significant theme for parents for whom the discovery that a child has a disability has been an overwhelming and life changing event. McGill-Smith (1993) describes reactions to the birth of a child who has a disability as including denial, anger, fear, guilt and confusion (p. 1-2). The parents face likely lifelong vulnerabilities of their children to extraordinary physical, intellectual, and emotional challenges. Furthermore, parents face their own vulnerability in identity and emotion as the parents of a child whose needs and expectations lie outside the norm. McGill-Smith advises parents not to be afraid of showing emotions and not to be intimidated by the line of professionals who enter their lives. But it is often these very professionals who expose and sometimes exploit that vulnerability.

Aware of the oppression that is inherent in their relationship with the school, parents become keenly aware of the risk that is involved if they confront the professional knowledge and culture of the school with their personal knowledge of children. Parents in this study were aware of their vulnerability and worked diligently to find ways to address that vulnerability in themselves and mobilize it for their children. Generally speaking, parental preferences in this study were to join with the school personnel in creating an environment for their children that facilitated development in a mutually beneficial way.

Parents first made attempts at social networking and community building such as offering themselves as classroom assistants, attending meetings, establishing relationships. If these engagements failed to secure their desired goals, parents made myriad trade off decisions such as whether to remain in one community or move to
another, opt for socialization or academic support, push for busing now or maintain rapport in order to meet another challenge later. In general, only after social networking and community building strategies failed did parents take other approaches such as legalistic engagement and outside advocacy – approaches that ironically opened parents to increasingly vulnerable postures for themselves and their children. To limit risk and maximize goal attainment, parents paradoxically avoid direct confrontation in order to maintain small orders of influence that they may have gained through social networking and community building.

The results of this study suggest that hoped for Moments of Encounter (MoE) are rare occurrences. Indeed in this study no parent described such an event. The MoE is a critical project that draws from the work of Buber and Friere. MoE calls upon participants to operate from standpoints of raised consciousness and awareness of the self and others as fully human beings. This standpoint makes dialogue possible.

Dialogue is the enactment of an inner, spiritual condition that links participants authentically. Dialogue enables participants to remove themselves from hegemony by establishing the trust needed to express vulnerability without fear of harm. For both parent and school, dialogue (Encounter) is a process which occurs when certain conditions exist. Dialogue occurs when there is detachment from agenda accompanied by trust that openness and expressions of vulnerability will not be interpreted as weakness. Dialogue occurs when there is trust that an idea can be critiqued without critiquing the presenter of the idea. Dialogue occurs when the
presenter of an idea is free to critique or retract an idea because the goal is not to be right but to find the right way.

When parent participants try to open dialogue with schools, however, too often they are confronted by the peculiarities of bureaucratic secrecy. Weber (1978) wrote that “bureaucratic organizations always tend to exclude the public, to hide its knowledge and action from criticism as well as it can” (P. 992). While the public face of schools is generally inclusive, parents in this study often were confronted by multiple attitudes and meanings among teachers, administrators and schools.

Metaphorically, they seem to be navigating a swamp in the twilight, looking for islands of safety. The same characteristics which make a bureaucracy “among those social structures which are the hardest to destroy” (Weber, 1978, p. 987), also make it resistant to dialogic communication that is characteristic of community. In their discussion of community based strategies for health care, Ford and Yep (2003) describe “possibility for change… as the central purpose of dialogue” (p.240). Parents desire community and build community. Dialogue enables light to illuminate the path to those islands of inclusion and community. Perhaps the greatest secrecy, then, is the secrecy of the heart which exists when school personnel are unable or unwilling to commit to dialogue.

From the perspective of critical theory, the movement from engagement to encounter, from dialectic to dialogue, from bureaucratic ideology to community ideology, is a spiritual journey. Kierkegaard describes the leap of faith to become “an authentic being, not a façade (as) important to baring oneself to others as one truly is.
Being conscious of the self and having a strong will is needed…” (Ediger, 2002, p. 7). In this leap, critical consciousness emerges carrying with it potential for parent and school to negotiate issues of meaning and the ownership of meaning in an environment of love, faith and humility (Friere, 1998, 70-71). When school and parent journey together, they have the resources to encounter each other in what ‘Abdu'l-Baha (1982, p. 72) describes as “spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love.” Why, we might ask, should love, faith and humility not be present in what is too often a mundane IEP meeting? It is in this meeting that we discuss the lives and futures of children.

Limitations

Studies in communication are limited as communication is fluid and communication is process. A communication study, then, is metaphorically a snapshot of a river at a certain point in its flow. The study reveals the state of the river as the image is taken and may reveal some of the underlying principle of the river. Move a few meters and it is both the same river and a different river. Metaphor aside, certain limitations are specific to this study.

This study is limited by the numbers of parents involved. Certainly, fifteen parents cannot speak for all parents. In addition, this study is limited in so far as parents represent middle to upper socio-economic level and most had time and resources to devote to many activities on behalf of their children.

This study was limited by its focus on the voice of parents only and did not include interviews with school personnel. Although demographic data was not taken,
I assume that the parents who participated in this study represent at least a middle socio-economic level, many have university training, and they all are members of a parent support group. Like the river, these parents may represent all parents in some ways and reflect certain values and characteristics of their group.

Finally, this study may have been limited by a tendency for parents to recall primarily negative encounters. Frankly speaking, it is easier to deconstruct the negative than the positive. As a researcher, I tried not to be lured into that trap but may have been anyway. Perhaps, akin to the river, the rapids are more interesting and visually stimulating than the stretches of quiet flow.

Future Research

This study demonstrates the importance of grounding educational research in theory and, by so doing, encourages future research into process rather than product. This study frames parent school communication as process and negotiation of meaning. A direction of future research would be to use MoE interviews to reframe parent school communication in terms of how decisions are reached and how dialogue can be established and maintained.

This study explores the role of researcher as participant in the raising of consciousness. Future studies, in which parents are interviewed repeatedly over a period of months, would reveal much about the manner in which the raising of critical consciousness affects parent interactions with schools over time. This study, then, invites longer range studies which use MoE as research tool and as intervention.
This study invites researchers to identify and investigate organizational applications of dialogue. In other words, look for organizations such as educational groups, business groups and religious groups which profess valuing dialogue in their organizational practice and conduct research, such as Moment of Encounter, in those organizations.

Conclusion

Schools are a stage upon which bureaucratic and community ideologies co-exist, clash and confuse. Community seeks out what will bind hearts while bureaucracy ignores matters of the heart and looks, instead, for compliance to rules and decision by data rather than by dialogue. Schools are a stage where parents experience the tension of bureaucratic and community ideologies competing to affect decisions about children.

Parents know what they want for the futures of their children. Parents want their children to find a place in society. Although this study did not begin as an explication of inclusion, inclusion emerged as a core meta-theme. Universally, parent participants value inclusion and community over traditional roles of school such as imparter of knowledge or enforcer of discipline. Friere (1998) denounced the banking method of education because it “begins with a false understanding of men and women as objects” (p. 58). In its stead, Friere advocates problem-posing education which is “hopeful” (p. 65) and “affirms women and men as beings… who move forward and look ahead, for whom immobility represents a fatal threat” (p. 65).
At a deep level, parents engage the school with problem-posing strategies on behalf of their children. Parents do not want their children abandoned to objectification. They want their children engaged in a lifelong process of participation with and contribution to society. The depth of commitment and expenditure of resources made by parents speaks of dedication to children’s welfare. It also speaks to the peculiar mix of bureaucratic and community ideologies that co-exist in schools and problemicize negotiations of meaning. Bureaucratic ideology translates into resistance by schools which are ostensibly mandated to include and support special needs children. Bureaucratic ideology is oppressive to parents and objectifies children. Lacking mutual desire to establish dialogue, parents and schools remain uneasily engaged in a hegemonous relationship of dialectic as they focus more on what works? than how do we work? or how do we live? or what are we?

This study has been one of disillusionment and encouragement, of frustration and hope. Critical theory reveals the very worst of human relationships while it illuminates the potential for the very best. Zoller (2000) wrote that, “when we want meaningful interaction, we have to meet people where they are, not where we want them to be” (p. 116). It is in the spirit of meeting them where they are that I conclude this study.
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Appendix A

Questions

1. Please recall a moment that was particularly memorable from the interactions that you have had with your child’s teachers and/or administrators?

2. Please tell me about that moment. What happened leading up to it? What actually happened? What was it about? Who was there? Where did it take place? Was it an official or unofficial meeting? What was said?

3. How were you feeling while this meeting was going on?

4. Why is this event so memorable to you?

5. What are the consequences of this event for you and your child? How did this event affect your relationship with the teacher/administrator?

6. Can you see a relationship between this event and similar experiences that you have had in the past with the school?

7. Did this meeting recall events from your own childhood or student days? Describe those events.

8. Was this event characteristic of most of your meetings with the school? How so?

9. What do you feel that you learned about your child’s school through this experience?

10. This seems to be a particularly __________ memory for you. Can you describe an event that is more __________?

11. Please tell me about that moment. What happened leading up to it? What actually happened? What was it about? Who was there? Where did it take place? Was it an official or unofficial meeting? What was said?

12. How were you feeling while this meeting was going on?
13. Why is this event so memorable to you?

14. What are the consequences for you and your child? How did this event affect your relationship with the teacher/administrator?

15. Can you see a relationship between this event and similar experiences that you have had in the past?

16. Did this meeting recall events from your own childhood or student days? Describe those events.

17. Was this event characteristic of most of your meetings with the school? How so?

18. What do you feel that you learned about your child’s school through this experience?
Appendix B
Comparison of Traditional Bureaucratic, Normative, and Feminist Types of Organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Traditional Bureaucratic Hierarchy</th>
<th>Normative</th>
<th>Feminist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Degree to which hierarchy is emphasized</td>
<td>High: Hierarchical: Authority at the top</td>
<td>Low: Relatively egalitarian; authority within collective</td>
<td>Low: Egalitarian; authority dispersed throughout organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division of labor is formal and specialized</td>
<td>High: Formalized; specialized</td>
<td>Low: Information; nonspecialized</td>
<td>Low: Informal; nonspecialized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment is based on expertise</td>
<td>High: Employment based on technical qualifications; previous thorough training in a specialized area; little or no job rotation</td>
<td>Low: Employment based on skills and knowledge; training on the job; job rotation</td>
<td>Low: Employment based on commitment to feminist agenda; training on the job; job rotation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs are segregated by gender</td>
<td>High: Not explicitly addressed, but norm is high segregation by job title; women clustered at bottom</td>
<td>High: Not explicitly addressed, but norm is high segregation by job title; women clustered at bottom</td>
<td>Low: Goal is minimal segregation; many feminist organizations all female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership style is authoritarian</td>
<td>High: Authoritarian leadership emphasized; autocratic</td>
<td>Moderate-low: Authoritarian leadership de-emphasized; participative</td>
<td>Moderate-low: Authoritarian leadership de-emphasized; participative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control is direct</td>
<td>High: Control is direct</td>
<td>Low: Control unobtrusive, through internalized values</td>
<td>Low: Control unobtrusive through internalized values reflecting feminist ideology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimensions</td>
<td>Traditional Bureaucratic Hierarchy</td>
<td>Normative</td>
<td>Feminist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making centralized and concentrated at high levels</td>
<td>High: Centralized decision making at higher levels; decisions final</td>
<td>Moderate: Consensual decision making within groups; open to renegotiation</td>
<td>Low: Decentralized decision making; open to renegotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate culture emphasizes competition</td>
<td>High: Competitive culture; status, rewards based on individual achievement</td>
<td>Moderate: Cooperative culture; fewer status differences; rewards distributed across collective</td>
<td>Low: Cooperative culture; differences minimalized; rewards somewhat equalized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work behavior determined by impersonal rules</td>
<td>High: Impersonal decisions; based on formal rules, applied consistently</td>
<td>Moderate-low: Group-specific decisions based on group norms rather than formal rules</td>
<td>Low: Individuated decisions based on personal relations and formal rules that are open to renegotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion treated as acceptable form of expression</td>
<td>Low: Emotional expression generally discouraged, devalued as irrational</td>
<td>Moderate: Emotion sometimes expressed, primarily for instrumental purposes</td>
<td>High: Emotion openly expressed, personal and work-related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work and private life regarded as separate</td>
<td>High: Private life presumed to be separate from work activity; private adapted to work</td>
<td>High: Private life presumed to be separate from work activity; private adapted to work</td>
<td>Low: Private life concerns are primary; work adapted to private rhythms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>