

***Opening the Classroom Door: Inviting Parents and
Preparing to Work Together in Classrooms***

IN MANY schools, parents are invited to work in the cafeteria, halls, or library to help maintain order and safety; to organize, shelve, and repair books; to do fund-raising for the school; or to chaperone class trips. When I first taught at Dunbar in 1962–1963, despite the fact that I could have used it, I was reluctant to request parent help in the classroom. In addition, it wasn't the custom in the school for parents to be invited in.

Then, as a young parent, while working for 3 years alongside Peggy Perlmutter Stone in my children's classrooms at the Westside Parent Cooperative Nursery and at Keyser School's kindergarten, I promised myself that when I again became a teacher, I would value the parents of the children I taught, just as I felt Peggy had valued me and the other parents.

When I began to teach as a fully certified teacher, I recognized that the invitation to parents must be serious; that both parents and I had to prepare for the experiences; and that there might be tensions, which I was confident could be overcome.

THE PARENT SCHOLAR PROGRAM

In 1967 the federal government funded the Follow Through program, in which grades K–3 in certain Title I schools implemented various teaching methods to attempt to maintain the gains children made in Head Start (Kennedy, 1977).¹ Philadelphia had eight different Follow Through models in place, each with a different sponsor. The government planned to track and compare the success of each. In the mid-1970s, the School District of Philadelphia formally inserted parent involvement into all the Follow Through models in the city. In Philadelphia, these parents were called Parent Scholars, and they were trained to work in all Follow Through classrooms in the city. Though in some parts of the country parents also worked with other parents in their homes, in my school they worked only in classrooms. This Parent Education/Parent Scholar program was one of the first examples of formal, national, institutional recognition that parents

who work with their children make a difference in their school success. In Philadelphia, parents were paid a stipend to work alongside teachers for 10 weeks. They received a small amount of training, had to attend meetings, and then worked with the teachers and children in classrooms.

Parent Scholars were expected to work with Title I–eligible children only. They worked for one 10-week period, had to skip the next 10-week period, and, if there were not enough new people to take on the work, could work for another 10 weeks. In 1981 I was not certain that I would be allowed to have a Parent Scholar in my classroom because at the time only nine of the thirty-two children in my room were eligible for Title I–funded assistance.²

WHY I INVITED PARENTS

Although some of my assumptions matched those of the Parent Scholar program (such as that parents would learn from my modeling), and though I appreciated its goal of including parents in classrooms, educating them was not my only goal. I had important reasons for wanting parents to join me in teaching in the classroom whether they were Parent Scholars or not.

I Needed Help

I taught in a less traditional manner, in a more informal way, in an “open” classroom. Such classrooms, though sometimes seemingly lacking in structure, actually require a great deal of planning and structure. That’s because some of the time students work in smaller groups or individually, with a variety of materials and choices. The presence of additional adults (such as parents) in a class of this kind with a large number of students (30–35) can be of enormous help. These adults can help prepare the materials and can also increase the adult-to-student ratio so that small-group and individual work become more feasible. They can help with the academic work in the classroom: reading with small groups of children or individual children, working with those who are having difficulty with math, playing games that give the children practice with important concepts, holding writing conferences.

Parents made it possible for me to have cooking and art activities (including clay, sewing, and painting). These were activities that either needed an adult to make the materials accessible, to keep them orderly, and to supervise their cleanup, or needed an adult to supervise the actual activity while another person watched out for the well-being of the rest of the

class. For example, for sewing, children often had trouble threading needles. If I'd had to thread all needles, that alone would have caused children who needed help in other areas to interrupt me many times. A parent's presence alleviated those interruptions.

An entry from my journal shows how beneficial a parent's help could be for the children.

5/5/81, Journal

If it weren't for Marcy, I'd never have finished the clay for firing. She's Isaac's mom and she owns a wholesale ceramic supply business. She really gets upset when she comes in and sees the mess the clay is in. So she helps. The kids work on it but I don't seem to find the time to do the things I like to do—give the guidance that kids need, fire the clay and have them glaze it. She is very tactful. . . . She's stayed and worked with the kids a few times and each time there's been an improvement in the care and quality of their work. I know from working so hard on the children's writing, how much they are helped by contact with adults and by conversations about their work.

A Calming Presence

Parents would be able to attend to individual children when it was sometimes difficult for a teacher with 33 children to do so.

More than occasionally, I seemed to lose control of the tone of the classroom. The afternoon of November 19, 1992, for example, couldn't have been more chaotic. It was late in the day. I insisted that the children complete some exercises on odd and even numbers before they went home, without giving them enough time. When I told them to prepare to pack up to go home, I realized I'd forgotten to have them glue the homework into their two homework books. And the children wanted me to keep my promise to share with them a small piece of the candy that one of the children had brought for me. To top it all off, it had begun to snow. The children became excited. Two very understanding parents, Wendy's mom and Karl's mom, walked in and, instead of being upset by the noise, just took over helping the children put homework into their books, which calmed me. They knew from previous conversations with me exactly what they could do to help. I managed to deliver a piece of the candy into each open mouth as the children left the room, feeling like a priest distributing the wafer at a communion. Those two parents saved the day.

Talents, Interests, and Cultures

Parents could add richness to the classroom with the clothing they wore, the languages they spoke, the literature they brought to us, the foods they helped us cook. With the exception of my Fulbright teaching year in England (where I taught many children of immigrant Indian Sikh and Hindu, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslim, and Afro-Caribbean parents), I had taught only about 15 children or children of parents who were born in countries other than the United States (China, Colombia, Yugoslavia, Finland, Denmark, Argentina, India, Malaysia, Japan, Russia by way of Israel). When I did, I tried to include their cultures, knowledge, and languages, whenever possible, in the curriculum, just as I tried to include the knowledge, language, and cultures of children and parents from various U.S. ethnic and racial groups (African American, Hispanic, Irish American, Jewish, European American, Asian American). One way that I did this was to display posters on the wall that contained the words for colors, parts of the body, and numbers, written in all the native languages of parents in the class. All the children and parents enjoyed seeing this variety of languages.

Among other ways home culture was brought into the classroom: Chinese and Chinese American parents taught about the Moon Festival and Chinese New Year as well as how to make steamed dumplings, to stir-fry string beans, and to use chopsticks (with popcorn). They described what it was like to be a first and second grader in China. An African American mother taught about how her family celebrates Kwanzaa; an Indian parent taught about the Hindu Festival of Divali and demonstrated traditional dance. Jewish parents taught about Hanukkah and Passover, and an Irish American mother taught about how her family celebrated their Irish heritage with food and singing and learning about famous Irish Americans. Inviting parents to speak to the class about their families' celebrations of their cultures and religions had much more meaning than when I did it, even if I was describing my own family celebration. I encouraged parents to keep their descriptions of their holiday practices close to what the family did and why and to downplay religious aspects. I also made sure that either they or I stated clearly that different people have different beliefs and ways of celebrating those beliefs. I don't remember any objections to these parent presentations.

The following three stories further illustrate ways in which parents' cultural knowledge enhanced my teaching.

Sub-Saharan Africa: Samantha. Samantha Green had danced in Philadelphia in a nationally known African dance troupe. Even before she did that, she had begun to adopt many traditions from various African countries in

her dress and her way of life. She eventually married a man from Ghana. She brought objects, her interests, and her expert knowledge of some cultures of sub-Saharan Africa to the children and me.

Her visits started when she asked if she could talk with the children about her work as a graphic designer. She talked about having wanted to be an artist since kindergarten. She showed them some of her drawings, stating that she especially liked to draw pictures that have African Americans and people from Africa in them. Our discussion of why she likes learning about people from Africa led to a discussion about the meaning of the word *ancestors*. Everyone in the class told from which continents or countries their ancestors had come to the United States.

When the children went to lunch, Samantha and I had some time to talk. Her daughter had not been in my class during first grade, but she knew from my newsletter to parents that I welcomed parents to join me in the classroom on a regular basis. We both felt that her first visit was very successful, and I invited her to follow up with more visits. I was delighted when she said she would come back once a week for the next few weeks. She offered to share some of her knowledge about culture in various regions of Africa, and, knowing that she was much more of an expert than I, I encouraged her to return as soon as she could.

As promised, Samantha brought artifacts from and about sub-Saharan Africa. Like a wonderful teacher, she had planned ahead of time. She brought a map of the continent and pointed to various countries: Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, and Gambia. As she prepared to show the children photographs in a book about Ghana, she first reminded them, "Remember—no laughing at people's names, at their clothes, food, or the words of their language." It was obvious to me that she'd done this before. Anyone who works with children knows that they often laugh at or deride things that seem strange to them. Each photograph elicited talk about its contents. She explained that in Ghana the language spoken is called Chree, and she introduced some words. When Malik said, "These words are hard to say," Samantha told the children that as they practiced and learned the words, it would become easy. She showed them a picture of a funeral and taught them a dirge. Thien asked, "Are they sad that someone died?" And she replied, "African people believe that the person is just gone. They believe good things will happen to the person who died and that the soul will go to another place."

Samantha's lessons and knowledge made me want to know more and made me want to help the children to learn more. Here was a person (a parent) who could guide us in our studies. I was grateful. I began a list in my journal of some things that I needed so that we could do an extended and deeper study of aspects of various cultures on the African continent.

12/86, *Journal*

1. Find a good, large map of the African continent.
2. Choose from among the African sculpture the school purchased with money from our arts grant (currently in the storage room) [and] display the sculpture in the main classroom. With string, link photographs and sculptural objects to the place of origin on the map.
3. Ask the children to write captions for the photographs that will be hanging near the map.
4. Take advantage of Samantha's knowledge of various African dances, and see if she will help us with some sort of culminating activity or performance that I'm now thinking of doing later in the spring.
5. Talk to the teachers at Powel School who'd received funding for books and artifacts about aspects of African culture and about their experiences teaching about it to the children.
6. Collect and make available books containing tales and stories from various regions of sub-Saharan Africa. I have an excellent collection in my class library but the school's good collection could augment it.

During the year Samantha worked in the classroom, I had a student teacher, Gwen, who I felt could be responsible for carrying out the activities related to this theme. I knew that collaborating on curriculum with a parent would be an unusual experience for a student teacher. I knew that she was interested in drama, and I saw the potential for that in our work with Samantha. I supervised but left the details to Gwen and Samantha. Samantha led the way. She read tales from Ghana and Nigeria to the children during various visits. She and Gwen determined that the children would enact a story about Anansi the spider. The children and Samantha chose a mask from a book about African masks to re-create in papier mâché. Starting with newspaper and window screening, they made a large mask, painting the surface with gesso that Samantha sent from home. Samantha painted the mask, and the children glued beads, shells, and straw onto it. Each of the children used a balloon as a form and made a small mask to take home.

The performance was more spectacular than any of my other classes ever did, previously or in ensuing years. I generally kept performances and culminating activities fairly low-key because in general I became tense when preparing elaborate performances and rehearsing them. Because of Samantha's guidance and help and the student teacher's efforts, I was able to stay reasonably calm. It was elaborate! We tie-dyed cloth for tunics and

head wraps for the girls, and for daishikis for the boys. Samantha designed the simple patterns, and all the children sewed their clothing by hand. She taught the class several songs, both in Chree and in Swahili, to accompany dances that she choreographed. She invited a professional drummer, a friend, to accompany the children during the performance. Gwen supervised the performance of the story about Anansi, the mischievous spider. The children performed all of this for the K–1–2 assembly and for their parents. I certainly didn't have the expertise Samantha had as a visual artist, as a professional performer, or as someone with a deep interest in and knowledge about African heritage. We were fortunate that she wanted to share all of this with the children and me.

New languages and literature: Marya. Igor's mother, Marya, had been in the United States for only a few weeks when she began to help in the classroom. She was a graduate student in the school of education at a local university. Though her son was only beginning to speak English, Marya was fluent. As did most parents who volunteered, Marya worked with children both individually and in small groups at reading, writing, and playing games. But I also wanted to learn about Marya's and Igor's home language and culture, and I was certain the children would be interested in that, too. One day when Marya was in the classroom and Igor was teaching us some words in Serbo-Croatian, I asked the children, "Is it easier for Igor to learn English or for us to learn Serbo-Croatian?" Many of the children said it would be easier for him to learn English. Leslie agreed and said that's because English is easier. Penny said, "More children in this room speak English, so it will be easier for him to learn English." When Marya saw how interested the children were in learning her language, she offered to teach it in a more formal way. So on days that she helped, we always set aside time for a lesson in the Serbo-Croatian language. Marya taught us greetings and farewells as well as parts of our bodies (by playing Simon Says). She taught us children's songs, and poems by Yugoslavia's famous poet Dushko Radovic, and she translated the poems for us. She wrote color words in Cyrillic letters, which we added to our bulletin board of color words in many languages. She used Cyrillic letters to label a child's drawing of a person with the Serbo-Croatian words for parts of the body. Sometimes she just talked to us—saying sentences whose meanings were fairly obvious—and we were pleased when we understood her.

In her second year of working with the same group of children, Marya came with different ideas about what she wanted to do with them. She taught Easter egg dyeing the way she did it when she was a child in Belgrade. Although she continued to speak Serbo-Croatian to the children, she particularly wanted to read some classic English books to them—books

she had loved as a child in translated versions. She started with the original versions of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. We worked through the difficult parts of the books, and the children loved them, looking forward to listening once a week. If the only reason for thinking of this as an excellent experience had been the number of math discussions the books led to (such as size and scale, bilateral symmetry, mirror images, quantity), it would have been enough to have made the experience outstanding. But the children grew to love the books—everyone, that is, except Tony, who said, “I liked it the *real* way I saw *Alice in Wonderland* on HBO.” I told him that what Marya was reading was the *real* way, which led to a very interesting discussion about movies and TV shows made from books. When we were finished with *Alice*, Marya read Kipling’s *Just So Stories*. Though the language is rhythmic and captivating, we had to watch for racism and stereotyping, and together, we either changed the stories slightly or addressed the issues raised. Those were books I never would have read to the children because I thought the language might seem unfamiliar or difficult, but they thoroughly enjoyed them. Marya showed me the way.

The Jewish New Year: Sandra. It was my 21st year of teaching in 1990, and I was new to a school where parents were not accustomed to working alongside teachers. They were, however, an active presence in the school. They volunteered and supported teachers in a great many other ways, including running a school store, holding various fund-raising events, and working in the office and library. In contrast, Martin’s mother Sandra helped in my second-grade classroom once a week.

Sandra asked if it would be all right if she brought some objects and told the children about the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which comprise the Jewish New Year. School would soon be closed for 3 days. I always explained the various cultural and patriotic reasons for school closings because I felt that sometimes reasons for holidays were mysterious to my young students. Whenever possible, I preferred parents to explain what these holidays meant to them.

Sandra and I met to plan; in this case, planning consisted merely of her telling me what she’d bring and outlining what she would say, and my offering to buy any food she needed. I let her know that sometimes during her presentation I might interrupt to be sure the children understood a point she was trying to make. I also wanted to be sure that she would tell the children that she would be describing her own beliefs and that she should acknowledge that some of them might have different beliefs.

I was pleased the next day when not only Sandra but also her mother, Mrs. Weinstein, arrived, carrying shopping bags. “I’ve come to talk to you

about Jewish holidays—the New Year holiday,” she said. One of the children spoke out, “I have Jewish holidays.”

Sandra told the children, “Jewish people have 10 days to think about whether or not they’ve been good, to apologize to people whose feelings they’ve hurt. There’s supposed to be a book where it’s written whether you’ve been good or not, and that book is closed after these 10 days.” We also talked about what a synagogue is (a word Sandra had used) and what the phrase *New Year* means. We spent some time talking about how people of other cultures celebrate the New Year.

She said, “You know, my favorite subject is food. I just love to eat. And when we Jewish people celebrate our holidays, we eat foods special for each holiday. Martin’s grandmother and I have brought some food things to show you and to eat.” And as she spoke about each item, she pulled it out of the shopping bags. First came apples and honey. She explained, “We eat apples and honey because they are sweet, and if you eat them you’re supposed to have a sweet year. There’s a special bread that Jewish people eat on Friday nights called challah.” She took a braided loaf out of her shopping bag, saying that for the New Year Jewish people eat a round challah to make them think of the whole year ‘round. Sometimes that challah even has raisins mixed in. She showed the children a picture of a round one.

“Many people eat fish that’s made a special way—chopped, then shaped into oval pieces and cooked with carrots and onions. It’s called gefilte fish, and we eat it at other holidays, too.” She showed the children the wooden bowl and *hoch messer* (chopper), along with the large pot her bubbi used for making this special chopped fish. She told us that the recipe she uses has been in her family for about 100 years.

Sandra pulled one more thing from her shopping bags. It was a shofar, made from the horn of a ram. She demonstrated how to make a sound by blowing into the narrow end, similar to making a sound on a trumpet. “The horn has to be curved,” she told us. “They blow it in the synagogue just about the time that book of the year is closed—you know, the book I was telling you about where it is written whether you were good or bad.”

After Sandra finished speaking, she and her mother stayed to help the children cut the apples into quarters to prepare for dipping them into honey. I posed two math problems for the children: (1) “If you cut an apple into halves, how many pieces would you have? What about cutting it into quarters? How many pieces all together?” (2) “I brought 15 apples. If we cut them in half, how many pieces will we have?” Project Time followed the discussion, and the children took turns cutting the apples using real knives, supervised by Martin’s mother and grandmother.³

After we cleaned up, the children sat in their places at the tables and we adults joined them. We waited until everyone was ready and holding

hands around the table. We thanked Sandra and her mother for teaching us about the Jewish New Year. And then we sang the song we always sang when we sat down to eat together. Years ago at the Parent Cooperative Nursery, a parent had liberally translated a Hebrew song, *heenay ma-tov oo ma-na-yeem shevet achim gam yachad* into the words: "Oh how very nice it is to sit and eat with friends."

Another Set of Observant Eyes

Parents would bring another set of eyes into the classroom, but from a perspective different from mine. Listening and seeing from a parent's point of view would teach me valuable things. Gayle, whose three children I taught, worked alongside me for 5 years, usually one or two mornings a week. Once, I remarked to her about how purposefully the children were working at writing/reading time. She said, "What I notice is the caring feeling that the children have for one another." As a teacher I was very hard on myself, so it was always helpful when a parent told me that the behavior I valued was actually happening or that a lesson they had observed while helping in the room or had heard about from their children was an effective one.

In 1990 I found myself having difficulty with some of the children in my new class. I felt a little better when I learned that a previous teacher had had difficulty with many of the same children. I didn't see that as an excuse to give up. Mr. Hadley, Malcolm's father, came to tell me that his son had lost his homework book, to complain about the homework I'd given (lack of clarity in the directions), and to say how concerned he was that his son was being teased. He decided to stay that day to help while the art teacher was in the room during my planning time. It was always difficult for the art teacher to handle the children on her own, and I usually stayed and worked in the back of the room rather than work elsewhere and return to chaos and very unhappy children. Mr. Hadley resolved to help the art teacher every week. One day when I did leave the room for a few minutes, I came back in time to hear and see Dontay yelling that Jordan had been bothering him. I tried to stop him from yelling. Mr. Hadley, who *had* seen the whole thing, intervened on Dontay's behalf. He told me that while I was gone, Jimmy had been constantly needling Dontay, that Jordan and Walter had been running around cursing. The art teacher had been unable to stop them. Mr. Hadley offered to work with the three boys so that the art teacher could work with the rest of the class. When I spoke with Mr. Hadley later, I told him that Dontay often got into trouble because his loud voice always drew my attention. For that reason, I was grateful for his observation.

Seeing Children Learning

Mrs. Carson had been coming to the class one afternoon a week. At around the same time she wrote a letter to the superintendent of schools (see Chapter 2), she wrote this one to me, letting me know that she could see that her daughter was learning.

2/22/84, Note

Dear Mrs. Strieb

I am really amaze with my daughter learning process. Charlene was cover her words and breaking down the spelling of words she didn't know. I am over joyed by her reading the song of Harriet Tubman. You make a parent like me appreciate a oustand teacher such as you. You are an asses to the public school of Phila. I thank God that Charlene had an opportunity to have you.

I have been working 8 hrs for the pass month and on Saturday for the pass 2 weeks. So our library day has stop and I can't come in for at least one more week. Then, I'll be back to normal. Maybe soon I'll have a phone. But, you can still reach me between 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. at work, [number] or write.

Thank you
Hattie Carson

P.S. I'm sending a ck to the library for a loss book!

Parents Learn, Too

At times as a young parent, I had used Peggy Perlmutter Stone's words and actions as a model for relating to my own children. Perhaps parents of the children I taught would do the same with my words.

MY NEWSLETTER: AN INVITATION TO WORK IN THE CLASSROOM

In addition to inviting parents to let me know their concerns (see Chapter 2), the newsletter was also the place where I invited parents to be an on-going presence in the classroom; to teach the children alongside me; to help me in other ways; to be an occasional presence (for trips and celebrations); to contribute from home; to bring children's sibilings to the classroom; to visit, stop by, or drop in; to send things to school with their

children or to bring things themselves. My newsletters to parents were my invitation to them to enter into the school lives of their children, both in school and at home, and to offer their own ideas.

I wanted the parents to know that I was sincere about inviting them to join me, so I gave specific examples of what they might do and actually did to help, both at home and at school. I also included their suggestions and comments. More important, when parents helped in any way, I thanked them in the newsletter for each thing they did. This recognition served two purposes: It let them know that I valued what they were doing for the children and for me and, more important, it gave other parents ideas for things they could do to become involved in the life of the school with their children. It was an attempt to give parents inspiration, encouragement, and an invitation to join in. It also told parents why I invited certain kinds of help.

10/25/98, Newsletter

A GREAT BIG THANK YOU to all of you parents and volunteers who have helped in the classroom:

Tina, Harriet's mom, has been in with Roman every Wednesday. We observed and described the baby and have talked about the important things a parent does to make the baby safe and comfortable. Roman is a most pleasant baby, which makes it possible for Tina to also work with the children. She helps with homework, she works with children who need extra help with reading.

Gayle, Johnny's mom, has worked with the class during formal lessons. She will be working with children at Project Time, playing games, reviewing work, hearing children read.

Debbie, Mark's mom, has listened to children read their own stories and other books. Mark's dad, Burt, has delivered two rugs to our classroom. He and Debbie donated the rug in the class library which makes our meeting times so much more comfortable. He delivered the one for the block corner. We haven't been able to use blocks because it would have been too noisy without a rug. Now we can.

Gene, Peter's cousin and guardian, volunteers when he can. He is studying at Community College and wants to learn all he can about teaching. He is a wonderful young man who hears children read and talks to them about their behavior. He went on the farm trip with us. Whenever he comes, we really enjoy it.

The night of the Parents' Meeting, Albert Carroll's parents came early and helped me set up the food.

Miriam Snyder's mom found us a praying mantis and brought it to school.

Esther Benton's mom went on the trip to the farm.

AND OF COURSE. . . . Teacher Kathryn has been in most Monday and Thursday mornings. She does so many things for the children and me. She works on homework, files papers, and most important, helps the children with writing and reading. She's been doing this for about five years, so she's quite experienced. She notices a lot of things about the children, and tells me about them. That really helps. She is also another sympathetic ear for them. The children LOVE Teacher Kathryn.⁴

WE ARE VERY GRATEFUL FOR OUR IN-CLASS VOLUNTEERS! WE ARE ALSO GRATEFUL FOR THE PARENTS WHO HELP US WITH SUGGESTIONS AND COMMENTS AND FOR THE GIFTS YOU'VE GIVEN THE CLASS. THE CHILDREN GAIN MORE BECAUSE OF YOU.

Assumptions underlay my inviting parents to work alongside me in the classroom. I assumed that parents had the right to see firsthand what their children were learning, what and how the teacher was teaching. Though parents and children who were unable or reluctant to work in the classroom might be unhappy, I assumed that the value of having parents participate in a variety of ways and my mentioning their contributions in newsletters overshadowed possible bad feelings.

PREPARING TO WORK TOGETHER

I taught in five schools. Some teachers with whom I taught were not enthusiastic about inviting parents into the classroom to work alongside them with the children. When considering inviting parents into classrooms, it is important to address teacher concerns. Here are some of the concerns I heard from teachers: Parents might not be well educated enough. They might become anxious or upset if they saw that their child wasn't performing as well as another child or as well as they thought he should. Parents might pay too much attention to their own children, and if they did, others would be jealous of that special attention. A child might be unhappy if her parents were unable to help in the classroom. Parents might think that teachers want to have help from parents because they are unable to do the job on their own. Furthermore, if parents are good enough to teach children, they might ask why teachers are even necessary.

Teachers expressed concern about matters of trust. They were afraid that a parent in the classroom might become a “spy,” spread rumors in the community, or tell half-truths about what went on in the classroom. That would be divisive rather than supportive of the teacher. Teachers wanted to trust that parents wouldn’t question their practice and wouldn’t ask them to justify and explain it. Finally, teachers weren’t sure they could trust parents to maintain confidentiality with regard to what they learned about individual children and what they observed.

These concerns are not unjustified. Working with parents in the classroom, inviting parents to join in the teaching, does take trust—trust in oneself as a teacher as well as trust that the parent is there to support both the teacher and the children. Yet during my years of teaching, I saw that some of that mistrust could be avoided by frank talk with parents.

I learned the importance of setting ground rules when parents came into the classroom. I could not assume that they knew what to do or knew what I would want them to do. I let parent volunteers know that I would never ask them to do work that I wouldn’t do myself. I could not assume they knew about confidentiality, so I explained what was required in that regard. Though I loved when a parent or volunteer took the initiative and did what needed to be done, more often parents wanted me to give them guidance. This was not always easy for me to do, but I learned. Ground rules were: Refer questions or complaints to me; don’t speak about individual children outside the classroom; please don’t talk with other teachers about me or what went on in the classroom; you’re here to work with all the children, not just your child.

In formal programs like the Parent Scholar program of Follow Through, parents were given “training” by that program’s managers. In some school districts, all volunteers were expected to go through “training” sessions. I wouldn’t call the way parents and I prepared to work together “training,” but it was important to establish a common understanding. We usually talked together first about what work I believed needed to be done, and then what work that parent would be comfortable doing, including interests and talents. In addition, I had some special ways of working with children, and it was important to me that parent volunteers get to know them. I used several procedures to show parents how they could work with the children and with me. Often I showed them to all parents, volunteers or not, so that they would know how to help children at school and their own children at home. If parents decided to work in the classroom, I would be pleased, but that was not the primary reason for my carrying out this orientation.

My Newsletter

The newsletter was my first vehicle to let families know the ways in which I worked with the children, to give them examples of the things parents did when they worked in the room, and to describe ways in which they could help their children at home.

Parents' Meetings

Parents' meetings were another occasion where they learned about what they could do in the classroom and how they could do it. I took advantage of the Back to School Night for parents at the beginning of the year to describe the classroom. However, I didn't think that was enough because these evenings were always rushed. At our school there were two 45-minute meetings with two different groups of parents. We expected delays because parents had trouble finding classrooms. Parents walked in and out because they had more than two children in the school. Some parents wanted to have individual conferences with the teacher. Sometimes the principal gave us material to cover with the parents that night, which further decreased my time to explain my classroom to them. And sometimes I found those nights good for only an introduction to what I was doing with the children—a rundown of the schedule with brief descriptions of each activity—and for parents to ask questions about issues that concerned them.

At those required meetings, I always invited parents to think about helping in the classroom. There was never enough time to give them the practice they might need to help effectively. As a result, I began to hold additional get-togethers for parents both during the school day and at night in parents' homes. These gatherings gave us more time to explore what the children and I were doing. I tried to hold them regularly throughout the year. My thinking was that for those parents who were interested in working with the children, such meetings would help them feel more comfortable about offering their help. Here is an example of the invitation I sent home to parents:

9/21/76, Note

Dear Parents,

At the beginning of each year I like to invite all parents to a meeting to discuss your goals and mine for our children. I also like to let you know some of the things we will be doing in the classroom in case you'd like to help the children and me.

There are usually two meetings: one during the day and one at night for people who work outside the home.

The day meeting will take place at 8:45–10:00 (just come inside with your child) and we will serve breakfast.

The night meeting will be at 8:00 and we will serve dessert.

If you would be willing to let us use your house for the evening meeting, please check below.

Please send the bottom of this letter back.

I hope we can get together next week. I'll let you know the exact date by Friday.

Please try to come. We'd love to meet you!

Sincerely,

L Strieb

At the meetings, I not only gave parents some sense of how a school day went and what and how I taught, but as an introduction, I also taught them some of the games I'd want them to play with the children and modeled some of the ways in which I taught the children.

10/2/81, Journal

At the parents' meeting I talked once again about the curriculum, through telling about the schedule. Then I taught several math games (Guess My Number, Guess My Rule, Vector Tic-Tac-Toe.)

Adults and children played together. It was a nice feeling. Belinda's mother felt it was a good meeting, since it gave the parents insights into how I teach.

During several years of team teaching, my teammate and I prepared for parents' meetings together.⁵ We held two workshops during which parents participated in an after-school example of our Project Time. We modeled some of the ways in which we taught children. We set out many of the materials used at Project Time. We gave them written directions for how to use materials such as the binocular stereoscopic microscope; classroom creatures; and construction materials like blocks, math games, marble track, and Lego. We listed questions they could ask the children. We knew that if the parents learned to play the games and were given questions they might ask the children, it would make their entry into helping easier for them and for us. At those workshops, I especially enjoyed watching parents sitting on the floor in the classroom trying to create structures as complex as those their children had made with the wooden marble track blocks.

Shadowing Me

A third way I tried to help prepare parents for helping the children was to have them shadow me as I worked with the children during the school day. I modeled as I helped children with writing, reading, playing math games, and cooking. For example, I invited parents who volunteered to help children with writing to observe writing workshops. They sat in on my conferences with individual children. I had particular ways of speaking with the children, of helping them to spell words, of helping them toward independence, and I wanted to be sure the parents understood what I did and why. For writing conferences I usually sat in a chair with a child seated to my left. I asked the volunteer to sit to the left and slightly behind the child so that she could see and hear everything that was going on. I did this for one or two visits or until both the parent and I felt ready for her to take over. Then I monitored the parent-child conferences until we both felt that the parent could hold conferences on her own.

Posters on the Wall

I listed questions parents could ask the children when working with them (for example, on writing) or suggestions they might give to the children for stories.

DIFFICULT TIMES

Working with parents in the classroom takes some flexibility, the ability to observe what's happening and to change course if it seems necessary. It takes an openness or willingness to engage in a back-and-forth, ongoing conversation with parents in which the teacher sometimes admits (at least to herself) to not knowing everything and is open to the ideas, observations, and suggestions of others. When that happens, when both parents and teacher are pleased with the situation, the children will benefit from the richness that is the usual result.

But even though I enthusiastically welcomed parents into the classroom, occasionally tensions arose between my expectations and parents' efforts, making it necessary to constantly work on them. There were times when I resolved these tensions in favor of the parents' view and times when my perspective prevailed. The goal was, of course, to attain a shared vision of what classroom experiences should prevail.

Inviting parents into the classroom means that a teacher sometimes relaxes control and keeps quiet even if things are not always as she wishes

they would be. Knowing when to intervene and when to wait can be tricky. There were times when I found it difficult having parents in the classroom, though those times were actually quite rare. In any given year, it helped to remind myself of past times that were difficult and then use those examples to aid me when preparing to work with a new group of parents.

Unreliable Parents: The Case of the Gingerbread Sleighs

It was hard for me when parents didn't follow through (came late, didn't complete what they started, left early).

One of the winter traditions of my teaching from the 1970s until I retired in 2000 was to cook, construct, and decorate a gingerbread cookie house with the children. I did not involve parents in this cooking project. Each day of the first week in December, we worked on that house. Each step of its creation led to several math, social studies, reading, or literature lessons, and over the years I'd developed and shared a "gingerbread house curriculum" with parents and other teachers. When the house was complete, I covered it with plastic wrap and displayed it in a prominent place in the classroom. During December report card conferences, the children were always excited to show the house to their parents and to respond to their questions about its construction.

On the day before winter break, we always invited the principal to our classroom to demolish the house. Parents visited the room that afternoon just to observe this ritual. After the principal had everyone laughing with his dramatic antics and broke the house into many small pieces with a baseball bat, parents filled plastic bags with pieces of the house for each child. As the children left the room for vacation, I handed each one of them a large piece of the house that had been important to building community. It was a beloved activity.

At the beginning of the 1991–1992 school year, in response to my invitation to parents to work with the children, Daniel's mother, Kassie, offered to help make an entire gingerbread village, adding that she was a professional cake decorator. I believed that her contribution would add a rich layer to our tradition and to the educational benefits that always come from cooking. Unfortunately, I didn't think through the details of the activity and this offer to help.

When the time for building the village finally came, I was not sure I wanted it to happen, partly because it would take a lot of time and partly because I selfishly didn't want my gingerbread house to be overshadowed. But I had agreed to the project and promised to pay for all the ingredients. About a week before we were to begin, Kassie approached me again, this time to say she'd reconsidered and felt that we should make gingerbread

sleighs instead of a village. She said she had made them the previous year in her son's class. She said she would make the five pattern pieces out of paper and would come to the classroom to help each child cut the patterns and the gingerbread sleigh parts.

To save time, I made the dough for the sleighs at home (the same dough as the dough for the gingerbread house), but as soon as another parent had helped the children trace the cookie pieces from the paper patterns, I realized that it would take much more time than I'd allotted for each child to do that task—and that I'd have to mix at least three more batches of dough to complete the sleighs.

After five days of working on this, I wrote in my journal.

12/11/81, Journal

These gingerbread sleighs are driving me crazy! This project will never again be done in *my* class. There are way too many pieces for thirty-three children to put together. I was trying to be supportive to a parent but I just wasn't thinking.

The worst part was that Kassie came in to help only one afternoon. She cut sleighs with only six children, had to leave early, and never returned. After that, Maddie (the classroom assistant), Bobbie (the Parent Scholar), and I did the work Kassie had promised to do. Though I wanted to stop making the sleighs, once we had started and the promise had been made, I had to be sure there would be one sleigh for each child.

What were the problems with this project? The ingredients became costly. The adults had to do the work for the children. It took too much time in general and too much time away from other teaching.

12/16/81, Journal

Sometimes a parent's help is a mixed blessing. I'll have to pay closer attention to the projects I agree to let parents start in the room. I must give more thought to those suggested by parents, and must be strong enough to do things on my own terms. . . . Next year I think I'll stick to my own traditions.

In years that followed, I didn't stop inviting parents to initiate projects with the children. I just made sure that I understood exactly what the parent wanted to do, exactly what the educational benefits might be, exactly what materials would be needed, and exactly how much time it would take. I also tried to be sure that the parent had demonstrated herself to be

reliable, someone who could be counted on to complete a project. I'd wanted to welcome Kassie, to support her taking the initiative. I do not blame Kassie. I could have changed my usual plans for the gingerbread house, but didn't want to. I continued making gingerbread houses in December until my final year of teaching.

A Change in Routine

I sometimes found it difficult to have parents in the classroom when it meant a break from the routine or a change in (my) plans. I believed that consistency of routine was essential for calm children and calm classrooms. One afternoon Mr. Norman, Mark's father, arrived in the office at 2:15, wanting to come up to the classroom. He'd brought his 3-year-old son with him. I told the secretary that I wouldn't be able to speak with him until after I'd dismissed the children at 2:45. Mr. Norman still insisted on coming up and waiting outside the classroom.

After I'd accompanied the children to the door downstairs, we sat down for a talk. He said he would be coming to the classroom at the end of every day to pick Mark up. I told Mr. Norman that parents were really expected to meet their children outside in the schoolyard, but he insisted that he would pick Mark up in the classroom.

He told me he was very concerned about Mark's behavior and would like a behavior report every day. Some parents liked written behavior reports, which I often had trouble remembering to complete. I told him I hoped he would accept a verbal report. The end of the day was the most difficult time for me. Everything seemed a rush and, in the rush, I often had trouble completing these written reports. I agreed to let him come to the room 15 minutes before dismissal time if, in return, he would help the children prepare for dismissal. I told him that at that time I would give him a verbal report on Mark. I didn't tell him how concerned I was that bringing Mark's toddler brother with him at this difficult time of day might be too much of a distraction for the children and for him.

Though I managed to give Mr. Norman verbal reports on Mark's behavior, as I'd expected, his younger son required a good deal of his time, the children in the class were distracted from getting ready to go home by the small child's antics, and Mr. Norman rarely helped them prepare to leave. I would not have minded the toddler's visit had it come at a calmer time during the day.

There were times when parents dropped in to visit. It was important to distinguish between visits to talk with me about their child (not acceptable when children were in the classroom and I was teaching) and visits to help the children and me. Sometimes parents wanted to help but hadn't

arranged to do so ahead of time. Sometimes they wanted to bring something to show the children and had forgotten to let me know. Usually when I received a call from the office announcing a parent's presence, I told the secretary to send the parent up, unless the purpose of the visit was to have a personal discussion about a child. In that case I'd set up an appointment to meet during my planning time or before or after school.

If I thought such a drop-in visit would be good for the parent, his child, and the class, I'd adjust to it. I didn't like to refuse a visit even if it meant stopping in the midst of what we were doing. Never wanting to miss a "teachable moment," I'd allow it. Spontaneous visits often happened when a parent came in with a younger sibling, as Tonya's mom did one day, and we interrupted what I'd planned so that we could observe the baby. Though I don't think parents took undue advantage of my flexibility and willingness to interrupt what we were doing, it was never easy to make the transition from what we were doing to what the parents needed.

When We Disagreed

It was hard for me if a parent did things in ways contrary to how I thought they should be done. I was responsible for the well-being of the children and for their learning. I have to admit that I, like most teachers, had certain procedures for working with children at certain tasks. I knew there might be other ways, but as the classroom teacher, I had to be comfortable that what the adults did with the children was at least consistent with my way.

Doing things her own way: Mrs. Case. Occasionally, but rarely, a parent would try to take charge in a way that was unacceptable to me. When that happened, I usually felt that I'd failed at letting her know the limits of her help. I once wrote in my journal, "What should I do when a parent's help contradicts what I want the children to do?"

Mrs. Case had been helping me since the first day of school. I had a set routine for helping children to spell words when they wrote. Before going to an adult for help, I wanted them to try to say the sounds of the letters as they tried to spell, and to write these down. I told them that if they weren't sure of a spelling, after they wrote their try they could circle the word. That way, the adult who had a conference with them would know they had tried their hardest. Mrs. Case could not get used to this system. Furthermore, she was upset with the developmental spelling.

One day as the children were writing, Mrs. Case turned out the lights (which I sometimes did to get the children's attention, but which parents never did), walked to the front of the room, pointed to the alphabet with a pointer, and directed all the children to say the words that named some

pictures. She then told them to find letters by saying the alphabet as she pointed to the letters until they came to the one they needed, in this case *t*. That's not a bad way to help beginners to match letter names with letter sounds, though it's tedious. But then she said, "For example, if you want to spell the word *this*, you know it starts with a *t*, so you look until you find it and write it down." Well, that wasn't such a good example. Children know that *top* starts with *t*, but unless they've been taught that *this* starts with *t*, they wouldn't know that. *This* doesn't start with the same sound as *top*.

When she became frustrated with developmental spellings, she began to spell words for the children, allowing them to write as she spelled. This was contrary to my way of encouraging them toward independence by "sounding out." The result was that many children gave up trying and continually asked adults to spell for them.

She was also disturbed by what she called the messiness of the handwriting of these beginning writers, so she began to draw lines in their unlined drawing-writing books, which I didn't do until the children's fingers were stronger and they could write within or on the lines. After she did that, many children refused to write without drawing lines first. For example, Mrs. Case's own child, who had begun to write independently, stopped trying to write new words altogether and would only copy sentences that she first dictated to an adult on lines that she took a great deal of time to draw with a ruler.

I spoke with Mrs. Case. I explained to her my reasons for teaching as I did. I also told her how important it was to ask me before she tried something new. It was an uncomfortable discussion, but after it she worked at paying more attention to my directions to the children about writing and spelling. Little by little, with my insistence that her own daughter was able to and should try to spell independently with various supports (word wall, picture dictionary, personal word list), her child went back to writing sentences on her own.

Causing noise: Mrs. Tredwell. It was school policy to allow parents of children in early grades to celebrate their children's birthdays in school if the teacher agreed. I always gave permission to do that. The following incident happened at a birthday party during my first week in a new school. I didn't know that elaborate parties were part of that school's culture or I might have handled things differently.

9/15/90, Journal

Aaron's mom brought a birthday party for Aaron today. It was WILD! . . . I don't mind a cupcake or some cookies or a piece of

cake or fruit for each child, but this was much more. Mrs. Tredwell arrived when the children were at science class, during my planning time. I had to talk to another parent on the telephone about a problem with her son, so I had to leave the room. I left thinking Mrs. Tredwell would know that she should prepare the classroom by setting up the party while I was out, but she'd done none of that. When I returned, the spelling papers and homework books were still on the desks and none of the party things were distributed. I asked her to do that while I went to pick up the children.

When I returned with the class and sent them to their seats, I noticed that ten places were missing plates, hats, and cups. Chaos ensued. That was the first exciting thing that happened. Mrs. Tredwell *loves* kids, but, because she's not worked with younger ones, she doesn't know how to keep things calm. She talked loudly and constantly; she had kids getting up and down; she moved all around the room as she talked, but didn't help me to stop kids from getting up and walking around. It seemed to me that as I got one child seated, another would pop up. She gave them whistles as a take-home party favor. WHISTLES! IN SCHOOL! In an open-space classroom connected to another class with no wall in between! It was really noisy and horrible. Yet no one got hurt, the children were good-natured and courteous to one another. I just stood there, embarrassed, worrying about the class next door, momentarily unable to get them quiet.

After the children went home, while Mrs. Tredwell and I were straightening up the classroom and talking about the party, I joked with her a little about how inappropriate her choice of party favors was because they added noise to an already noisy setting. We laughed as she apologized. I'm sure she'll never do something like that again.

Unhappiness with My Own Teaching

It was hard when I was unhappy with my own behavior or my own teaching, and the parents were witnesses to those times. Those times made me uncomfortable, and they were many. It was always easy to write about the bad times. They stood out. I often wrote in my journal, "I was embarrassed that the room was so messy—messier than I can remember a room of mine being for a long time."

The following story illustrates a time when I was unhappy with my teaching and a parent witnessed my tension about it. Abdul Khalifa was a student from Malaysia who began attending our school in January, while his father was a graduate student. Though Abdul spoke some English, he

was not fluent. His mother, aware of American customs and those of our school from having volunteered weekly in the classroom for a month, arrived one February day with a birthday cake and other refreshments for a party. I noted in my journal: "I was embarrassed at what she witnessed."

Her son took a book from Jimmy, and Jimmy got angry and started to yell. Dontay entered the argument. Abdul elbowed one of them, and Dontay wouldn't stop yelling at him about it, even when I reminded him that he'd punched Abdul in the eye the day before. With some humor I wrote, "It was loud and awful, but a rich language experience for Abdul."

In addition to the fight, as I looked around the room, I noticed that there were papers everywhere, on every surface, and they seemed to have no order to them. And, finally, to make matters worse, before the party I gave out calculators for a lesson for the first time, forgetting to set some ground rules (which I usually do when I introduce a new material) and forgetting to count them. When I first collected them, six were missing. In the end, I had to say, "No party until we find those calculators" (words I hate saying). Two calculators were never returned. But yes, there was a party.

I noted in my journal that it took forever to prepare for the party and Mrs. Khalifa was watching. Yet again, I'd failed to prepare ahead of time and she'd forgotten to bring either matches or a knife, so the children had to wait until I'd asked another teacher for both. Understandably, the children became quite restless while they waited. Finally the party happened and it was lovely. Before we had a chance to sing, Abdul blew out the candles. The children were stunned. His mom explained that in their country that's what they do.

Many of the children had spent all of Project Time drawing birthday greetings to Abdul on the board and making him cards and messages. Flora and someone else saved food from their lunches and gave it to him as a little present. I found it very thoughtful, touching, and supportive. It was their idea and they carried it out beautifully.

In spite of the lovely party, I told Mrs. Khalifa that if, after all the mess, noise, and fighting, she wanted to speak to the principal about removing her son from my class, I would certainly understand. She replied, "I want you to teach him. I want him in this class." I felt good about that because, in addition to the noise and the fighting, she must have noticed the other positive things that happened.

When a Parent Seemed Unhappy

A Parent Scholar once said she was surprised that the children in my class seemed far behind those in her daughter's class. For example, by the middle of October, when she told me this, her daughter's class had already been

taught how to write the whole alphabet. (It seems very strange to be writing this now because children are now supposed to be able to do that in kindergarten.) And her daughter's class had not only one sheet of dittoed, written homework but also several sheets of math problems, including fractions. I said calmly (though I was uncomfortable), "Well, not all teachers teach in the same way. I start kind of slowly. But my students usually end up doing as well as the others." Interestingly, I noted in my journal at the same time that this Parent Scholar really paid attention to the children when she worked with them and then told me her observations. I found her descriptions to be both accurate and helpful. So for me, her criticism was tempered by her helpfulness.

In spite of the time and effort it took to prepare parents to work alongside me, in spite of my embarrassment about my own teaching, in spite of the fact that some parents were unable to participate, throughout my teaching life, the richness parents brought to the children and me when they worked alongside me overcame those difficulties.

WHEN PARENTS DON'T ENTER THE CLASSROOM

When I started teaching full time in 1970, I quickly realized that I couldn't expect all parents to join me in the classroom. Many parents were unable to spend time in their children's classrooms. They worked full time and many couldn't take time off, even for report card conference, because they'd lose precious pay. Some parents didn't want to spend time in their children's classrooms. They worried that their children would be too "clingy" or would behave in a way that would embarrass both parent and child.⁶ There were other reasons parents didn't help in the classroom. Some parents were too busy with small children and the many tasks in their homes; others felt that they had no contribution to make; others had had terrible school experiences as children and didn't want to have anything to do with schools; still others believed that there was no need for parents in the classroom—that it's the teacher's job to teach, not theirs.

I know that some children felt sad when they saw others' parents helping but not their own. However, I decided early in my teaching that the benefits gained from the presence of parents in the room, benefits to many of the very children whose parents couldn't come in, made it worth doing. I always spoke to the class about the reasons some parents were unable to work in the room and the children appeared, without exception, to be accepting. I was determined to not only "keep the door open" for parents but also to actively invite them in.