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VIEWPOINT

Family-School Interactions: The Cultural Image of Mothers and Teachers

Sara Lawrence Lightfoot

One might expect parents and teachers to be friends. After all, they are both vitally concerned with children. Yet both social science and experience recognize conflicts between families and schools, which, in an industrialized society, are amplified when minorities and the poor are involved. This paper will explore some origins of such tensions and argue that we must learn to distinguish between positive and negative forms of dissonance. In addition, it will look at the special role of women as central figures in the socialization process.[1]

The Parent-Teacher Conflict

To a degree, the roles of parents and teachers are obviously defined

Portions of this essay will appear in a book about families and schools by Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, forthcoming in Fall 1978 (New York: Basic Books).

1. In this paper I will focus on parents and teachers of elementary school children. Although many of the interactional dimensions between families and schools remain constant across grade levels, different issues emerge as children grow older, become more independent of their families, more identified with the values and perspectives of their peers, and feel less need for parental protection, guidance, and support. Because almost all elementary school teachers are women, I will use the feminine pronoun throughout. For other analyses related to the issues raised in this article, see Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, "The Teacher: Overcoming the Power of Cultural Images," *Harvard Graduate School of Education*

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differently. In her fine book, *Small Town Teacher,* Gertrude McPherson contrasts the *primary* relationship of parents and children against the *secondary* relationship of teachers and children. Parents have *particularistic* expectations for their children while teachers have *universalistic* expectations.[2] In other words, when parents ask the teacher to be "fair" with their child or to give her/him a "chance," they are usually asking that the teacher give special attention (i.e., consider the individual qualities, the developmental and motivational characteristics) to their child. When teachers talk about being "fair" to everyone, they mean giving equal amounts of attention, judging everyone by the same objective standards, using explicit and public criteria for making judgments. Even those teachers who believe in the individualistic approach to teaching and try to diagnose the special cognitive and social needs of their children seem to have universalistic standards and generalized goals toward which they are conscious of working. Clearly, the universalistic relationship encouraged by teachers is supportive of a more rational, predictable, and stable social system with visible and explicit criteria for achievement and failure.

Nor does the teacher-child relationship suffer the chaotic fluctuation of emotions, indulgence, and impulsivity that are found in the intimate association of parents and children. It may become a protective kind of interaction that makes it psychologically possible for teachers and children to decathect each other at the end of the year. Even those teachers who speak of "loving" their children do not really mean the boundless, all-encompassing love of mother and fathers, but a very measured and time-limited love that allows for withdrawal. Indeed, Anna Freud explicitly proposes that the teacher's role be far more emotionally circumscribed and objective. She talks about the need for mothers and teachers to perform distinctly separate roles. "The teacher's role is not that of a mother-substitute. If, as teachers, we play the part of mother, we get from the child the reactions which are appropriate to the mother-child relationship—the demand for exclusive attention and affection, the wish to get rid of all the other children in the classroom."[3] Moreover, teachers should avoid rivalry with mothers, "who are the

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Bulletin 19, no. 3 (1975): 14–18, and "Sociology of Education: Perspectives on Women," in *Another Voice: Feminist Perspectives on Social Life and Social Science,* ed. M. Millman and R. Kanter (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1975), pp. 106–43.

2. Gertrude McPherson, *Small Town Teacher* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 121. For related comment, see Talcott Parsons, "The School Class as a Social System," *Harvard Educational Review* 29, no. 4 (1959): 297–318; and Robert Dreeben, *On What Is Learned in School* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1968).

3. Anna Freud, "The Role of Teacher," *Harvard Educational Review* 22, no. 4 (1952): 229–34, esp. 231. See, too, her distinction between "child care" and "child education" in *Psychoanalysis for Teachers and Parents* (New York: Emerson Books, 1935).

legitimate owners of the child." Similarly, the teacher must not shift into the therapist role and become dangerously sensitive and responsive to the emotional involvements of the child. In effect, Freud asks that teachers become neutralized, objective human beings who avoid creating strong emotional and sexual bonds with children; that the teacher-child relationship be removed from drive-activity and instinctive wishes. Interestingly enough, she assumes that the teacher of young children will be a woman, but she feels that the teacher's role must be limited in such a way that she is less seductive, less entrapping to the expressive instincts of young children. Perhaps she must be thought of as less nurturant, less loving, and even less "womanly."

Though the roles differ, parents and teachers continue to share many of the same responsibilities for the socialization of children. Much of the difficulty between them comes from the fact that their exact spheres of influence are not clearly delineated. Parents often attempt to extend the years of parental protectiveness and control. This seems to reflect a possessive view of children as *property*—a commodity to be owned by nuclear families, a competitive resource that will give potential status to their hardworking parents. In that sense, children are viewed as the projection of their parents. When parents defend their children and argue for continuous and ultimate control over their lives, they are also (perhaps primarily) concerned with protecting their own status in society and assuming some measure of control over their child's future. Ambivalence then surrounds the child's school life as teachers and parents argue (often too silently and resentfully) about who should be in control within it. For instance, who should dictate the child's school attendance? Do parents have the right to keep children out of school for reasons other than illness? Although parents and teachers often seem to disagree about who has the right to govern a certain area of a child's life, teachers are usually forced to accept the parents' definition.

The sphere of influence in which the teacher feels that her authority is ultimate and uncompromising seems to be *inside* the classroom. Parents are often not welcome there, and if their presence is permitted, they are usually asked to observe rather than to participate. Yet, teachers are not always merely concerned about territoriality. In a study that Lightfoot and Carew did, teachers were given in-depth interviews that included questions about their perceptions of the legitimate role of parents in and around the school setting.[4] Since the children were ages three to six years, one might have anticipated more collaboration between teachers and parents in such early stages of development than in later elementary school years. The teachers were unusually reflective, thoughtful, and conscious of their evolving relationships with children

4. Sara Lawrence Lightfoot and Jean V. Carew, *Individuation and Discrimination in the Classroom* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Child Development, 1974), research supported by funds from Child Development Associates, Inc.

and parents. The school encouraged, in fact depended on, parental participation in fund-raising, class trips, and other extraclassroom affairs. The teachers' primary reasons for parental exclusion from the classroom were embedded in their ideas about establishing an enduring and nurturant relationship with the children that would not be modified or entangled with the burdens and problems of home life. In some sense, they saw themselves as child advocates, protectors of the child's new domain, and they stressed the developmental and emotional need for a clear and early separation between familial patterns and the demands made upon children in school.

Despite the negative quality of the relationship, parents and teachers are forced to have some minimal level of interaction concerning their children. Most schools organize parent-teacher associations and invite parents to highly contrived and public open-house meetings. These are usually vacuous, ritualistic occasions which protect everyone from meaningful interactions and confrontations, but symbolically reaffirm the idealized parent-school relationship.[5] Individualized interactions between parents and teachers are rare and specially requested—usually arising out of dissatisfaction, frustration, or anger on the part of parents and/or teachers. Teachers rarely call in praise of a child. Parents, on the other hand, rarely call a teacher to praise her. Although the negativisms between teachers and parents are part of a phenomenon that cuts across lines of class, race, and ethnicity, the teacher's perceptions of parents and the quality of the relationship vary enormously among different parent groups. In *Small Town Teacher,* McPherson reports that the teacher identified with the average people in town, felt vulnerable and powerless in relation to the upper-middle class, and considered only the lower class as really inferior. Sometimes teachers tried to form temporary alliances with identifiable subgroups of parents who were perceived as being cooperative. Poor parents were sometimes taken into the teacher's confidence when they adopted an obsequious and humble manner. The teachers were viewed as the gatekeepers for their children's social mobility, and teachers appreciated the parents' nonthreatening appreciation. Middle-class parents often became potential allies for teachers because of their shared convictions about the value of achievement and hard work.[6] But, for the most part, teachers felt they could not trust or depend upon coalitions with parents, and they feared that real collaboration might lead to an awkward confusion of roles.

In my own interviews with black teachers in a public ghetto school, I found varying perceptions of the abilities and strengths of poor black parents—ranging from the stereotypic image of parents as shiftless, lazy,

5. Richard Warren, "The Classroom as a Sanctuary for Teachers: Discontinuities in Social Control," *American Anthropologist* 75 (February–June 1973): 288.

6. McPherson, pp. 139–40.

uncaring, and without ambition for their children to understanding and empathetic views of parents as committed and caring but unable to negotiate the complexities and hostilities of the school system.[7] The latter group of teachers viewed poor black parents as potential collaborators in an educational, cultural, and social enterprise. The teacher's perceptions of parents seemed to be related to her own view of parents as *victims* of an unjust and racist society (rather than responsible creators of their own helpless condition) and the teacher's identification of her own place on the social ladder, her own sense of power and influence in the occupational and social world. One teacher said, "I lived in a real big ghetto, in a housing project. I was not really hungry or anything, but I know what it is to be a welfare recipient . . . and see my mother sneak out to work. . . . I think I can identify quite easily with people who are lower-class. People who are trying. *My family is the working class*" (emphasis mine). For her, teaching was far-reaching and inclusive and involved the active and critical participation of parents: "No matter what you do as teachers, or what is done as a community, or what is done as a school system, *the parent is the first teacher* [emphasis mine]. Unless black parents come together, there's not going to be much hope for their children, they've got to be concerned."

In divergent settings, teachers may give different reasons for trusting some subgroup of compatible parents, but in general they tend to see the parent mass as a threatening monolithic force. They may form strong bonds among themselves in fear (and disdain) of parents and look for institutional support to protect their interests. In the small town school that McPherson describes, the teacher felt particularly anxious and threatened by the upper-middle and upper classes because she experienced no institutional buffers between her and the parents. The principal owed his job and his allegiance to those high in the community power structure, and he worked hard to respond to their demands even if that meant being irresponsible and demeaning to his teachers. Yet, Howard Becker describes a different relationship among teachers, administrators, and the community.[8] He claims that in the big city schools of Chicago, teachers and administrators banded together for mutual protection against parental intrusion. Teachers made an implicit bargain with their superiors that they would support the organization as long as the organization served to protect them from parents and critics. The

7. Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, "Politics and Reasoning: Through the Eyes of Teachers and Children," *Harvard Educational Review* 29, no. 4 (1973): 197–244.

8. Howard Becker, "Social Class Variation in Teacher-Pupil Relationships," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 25 (1952): 451–65. For another exploration of the origins and characteristics of teacher authority, see M. Fullan and W. Spady, "The Authority System of the School and Innovativeness: Their Reciprocal Relationships" (paper presented at the meetings of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, St. John's, Newfoundland, June 1971).

mutual protection of individual teachers and the structure of the total school insulated both from forces of change.

Although various social analysts and educators have talked about the teacher's relationship to parents and the surrounding community, people have not studied or cared to document the parents' role from the parents' point of view. In *Small Town Teacher* McPherson reminds readers that, although she is writing about parental concerns, she is talking about the teachers' perceptions of their interactions with parents. One rarely hears the story of parents who are in the process of trying to communicate their concerns and cope with the complexities of the school system. "Parents . . . remain nameless and powerless—always described from the position of the middle-class institution, never in relation to their own cultural style or social idiom."[9] Teachers and principals have developed strong negative images of parents which justify their exclusion from the schooling process without actually knowing them. For instance, one of the predominant myths about black parents and poor parents who surround innercity schools is that they (1) do not care about the education of their children, (2) are passive and unresponsive to attempts by teachers and administrators to get them involved, and (3) are ignorant and naive about the cognitive and social needs of their children. When the parents of black children, however, are questioned about their attitudes toward schooling and their ambitions for their children, education is not only valued, but formalized schooling is seen as the panacea. In his study of black communities in Washington, D.C., Hylan Lewis points out that "the added value placed on education of black children as a means of escaping low and achieving high status is a myth-like cultural theme."[10] As a matter of fact, he suggests that the conflict between the lofty aspirations of black parents for their children and the limited, realistic social and economic opportunities available to them is precisely the pattern which invites deviant behavior in their children.

Tensions between parents and teachers are also part of the fabric of a competitive, materialistic society. The school is a major mechanism of sorting and standardizing human resources. Some parents may want their child's education to reaffirm the cultural and social experience of their community, while the teachers will often in contrast urge the children to transcend the boundaries of their traditions and history and initiate their families into the styles of mainstream America.[11] Other

9. Charles A. Valentine, *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter Proposals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 80.

10. Hylan Lewis, "The Changing Negro Family," in *School Children in the Urban Slum,* ed. Joan Roberts (New York: Free Press, 1967), pp. 397–405, esp. 400. See also Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, "Politics," p. 216.

11. Such a school may in some respects resemble the "city school," one of Margaret Mead's three images of the American school which correspond to three role definitions of

parents may recognize the need for the child's successful and complete separation from them as a prelude to his/her future achievement in the corporate world beyond family and school.

> When one joins the values of independence, hope in the future, and mobility, it is easy to understand why the successful separation of the child from his family of orientation and his own willful launching upon a career are both possible and necessary. But the potential and recognized consequences extend to the very nature of relations within the family itself. Consciously the future is optimistically viewed; and the task of the family is to equip the child as effectively as possible in the present with all the available means for his solitary climb to better and more prosperous worlds lying far ahead of him.[12]

In either case, a parent's values and skills are thought to be inadequate for the complex and changing society children will grow into. Strong teachers are considered necessary when parents are thought to be less than adequate.

Still another cause of confusion and anxiety within nuclear families that inevitably leads to difficulties in the family's relationship to schools can be traced to the historical role of schools as major institutions for social order and social control—an institutional strategy designed to insure that deviant and threatening strangers would not challenge the status quo. Samuel Bowles describes the transition from a precapitalist society, in which the basic productive unit was the family, to capitalist production and the factory system, in which the authority structure, prescribed types of behavior, and response characteristics of the workplace became increasingly distinct from the family.[13] An ideal prepara-

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the American teacher. Mead also discusses "the little red school house" and "the academy." Although the three cultural definitions of the teacher often combine to form our conception of the teacher role, parts of the three definitions may be in conflict with one another. Each image of the American teacher implies a different set of personality characteristics, social skills, and cognitive facilities. Each role implies both a different relatedness to parents and community and a different kind of adaptation and responsiveness to the changing needs and demands for society, implicitly and explicitly imposed by the world of work in which children will eventually find themselves. Despite all the differences, there is one theme shared by all three definitions: the expectation that teachers should be all-giving, nurturant servants of the people whose job expands to adapt to the needs of society. See Margaret Mead, *The School in American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951).

12. Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, *Culture and Community* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), p. 377.

13. Samuel Bowles, "Unequal Education and the Social Division of Labor," in *Schooling in a Corporate Society,* ed. Martin Carnoy (New York: David McKay Co., 1972), pp. 36–64. For a more in-depth historical analysis of schooling as a mechanism of social control and oppression, see Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New

tion for factory work was to be found in the social relations of the school—discipline, punctuality, and the acceptance of authority. So there was an illusion of a benevolent government offering an opportunity for all. In actuality, schooling was (and is) a mechanism of social control and a place to inculcate workers with the motivational schemes for factory work.[14]

There is, therefore, the illusion of mobility and assimilation through schooling which creates distance and hostility between middle-class–oriented teachers and lower-class parents (i.e., the parents expect that the schools will change their child's orientation toward middle-class life; mothers are made to feel inadequate in preparing children for an uncharted future; and families relinquish the final remnants of their cultural patterning and familiar social structures), while in reality the educational system serves less to change the results of a primary socialization in the home than to reinforce them (and denigrate them) and render them in adult form.

Mothers, Teachers, and the Image of Women

Because mothers and teachers are at the center of these discontinuities and conflicts—the mother is thought to be the dominant shaper of the child's primary socialization, the teacher is thought to be the most important force in the child's transition into the adult world—and because all mothers and many elementary school teachers are women, the antagonisms I have described will largely be between women. In addition, the cultural roles and images of both mothers and teachers have been at once idealized and demeaned in American society. The negative images attached to mothers and teachers are emotionally charged. When people tremble at decaying social institutions and disintegrating community life, mothers and teachers become culpable objects of discontent. Although such social and cultural images distort, even contradict, reality, they have the power of half-truths. That is, they become incorporated into the ways in which people define their lives and identities.

As cultural definitions of good and bad become more ambiguous in our society, as the future becomes less predictable, the definitions of the teacher's role found in the literature have been enormously expanded. Critics of formalized schooling and advocates of strong familial socializa-

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York: Basic Books, 1976); and Michael Katz, *Class, Bureaucracy, and Schools* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971).

14. See Eleanor B. Leacock, *Teaching and Learning in City Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), for similar contemporary observations about New York public schools.

tion have challenged the all-encompassing influence of teachers in the lives of children. In *Deschooling Society,* for example, Illich claims that schools have taken total control over the lives of children, and that the teacher has become a custodian, preacher, and therapist.[15] The mother's role is seen as even more encompassing and dispersed than the teacher's role. Mothers, thought to be the ultimate extension of the women's role in this society, are ultimately blamed for a child's incomplete socialization.[16] The school becomes the first place where *mothers* experience public evaluation and scrutiny, where teachers and other mothers voice approval or disapproval of the mother as reflected through the child. Since cognitive growth signifies adequate preparation for school, its rate reveals the skills and competence of a mother in terms of how well she has prepared her children for school. Hess and Shipman and their colleagues epitomize a general orientation of the child development literature when they characterize disparities in cognitive growth between children of middle-class and lower-class mothers.[17] The authors based their arguments on three major assumptions that generally go unquestioned in the literature. (1) The behavior which leads to social, educational, and economic poverty is socialized in early childhood. (2) The central quality of cultural deprivation is the lack of cognitive meaning in the mother-child communication system. (3) Cognitive growth occurs in families where mothers provide a wide range of alternatives of action and thought, and cognitive growth is restricted in families where mothers offer predetermined solutions and few alternatives for consideration and thought; these divergent communicative styles during preschool years are said to create children with different verbal and cognitive abilities and different potentials for successful school and vocational performance. Even if one ignores all the methodological problems with their laboratory experiment on mother-child communications, Hess and Shipman give value to an ethnocentric language structure, view language as the only valuable means of communication, provide a model of socialization that anticipates only one good and productive end point, and never question the structure and function of the institutions in

15. Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

16. See, e.g., J. McV. Hunt, *Intelligence and Experience* (New York: Ronald Press, 1961); R. Green, "Dialect Sampling and Language Values," in *Social Dialects and Language Learning,* ed. R. Shuy (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1964); C. Deutch and M. Deutch, "Theory of Early Childhood Environment Programs," in *Early Education: Current Theory, Research, and Action,* ed. R. Hess and R. Bear (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1968); and I. Katz, "Research Issue on Evaluation of Educational Opportunity: Academic Motivation," *Harvard Educational Review* 38 (1968): 57–65.

17. R. Hess and V. Shipman, "Early Experience and the Socialization of Cognitive Modes in Children," in *Learning in Social Settings,* ed. M. Miles and W. W. Charter, Jr. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1970), pp. 170–87; and R. Hess, V. Shipman, J. Brophy, and R. Bear, *The Cognitive Environments of Urban Preschool Children* (Chicago: Graduate School of Education, University of Chicago, 1968).

which a great majority of mothers and children are judged as deviant strangers.

The general orientation of such child development research, therefore, is to judge the competence of mothers harshly; ignore the social, economic, and psychological forces influencing their actions with children; and reflect and reinforce the distance and distrust between mothers and teachers (who are viewed as inheriting all of the mother's failures). When teachers are encouraged to blame mothers for inadequately preparing their children for successful social and cognitive assimilation in school, then the relationship between mothers and teachers becomes defensive and accusatory, and teachers are not likely to look beyond the boundaries of the mother-child relationship for the origins of difference and deviance in their children.

Ironically, mothers and teachers are caught in a struggle that reflects the devaluation of both roles in this society. Their generalized low status makes them perfect targets for each other's abuse. Neither dares to strike at the more powerful and controlling groups who are most responsible for their demeaning social and economic position. Not only do they provide relatively safe and visible objects of discontent for one another and for the rest of society, but mothers and teachers are also involved in an alien task—required to raise children in the service of a dominant group whose values and goals they do not determine. In other words, mothers and teachers have to socialize their children to conform to a society that belongs to men. Within this alien context, it is almost inevitable that mothers and teachers would not feel an authentic and meaningful connection to their task and not completely value the contributions of one another.

In recent years, a severe cultural lag has developed between the teacher stereotyped by culture and by the professional literature and the real lives of contemporary teachers: "They want acceptance as working equals, equality of status, and recognition of their competencies in their own area of responsibility. . . . Putting it bluntly, they do not want to be talked down to but they do want to be talked to at eye level. . . . In the dignity of their professional competence they do not appreciate being directed in every detail of their daily function."[18] Yet perception of teaching as a low status job persists, partly because the image of the teacher is connected to images that belong to the family, despite the conflicts between teachers and families.[19] First, the teacher is seen as

18. Joseph Azzarelli, "Four Viewpoints," in *Struggle for Power in Education,* ed. F. W. Lutz and J. J. Azzarelli (New York: Center for Applied Research in Education, 1966).

19. Social scientists have attributed the low social status of teachers to a low respect for intellectual endeavors, the preponderance of women in the profession, the lack of professional autonomy (i.e., the lack of power in the gatekeeping function), and the low degree of professionalization. There are of course differences in the way the teacher is perceived by various subgroups in this society. To those groups who have been systemat-

female, for reasons other than the large proportion of women in the profession. Character traits that symbolize the psychosocial qualities we attach to both male and female teachers are the traditional "womanly" dimensions of nurturance, receptivity, and passivity. However, they also include childlike dimensions of creativity, affection, and enthusiasm. In order to communicate effectively with children, teachers must, according to a cultural definition, exhibit the nurturant, receptive qualities of the female character ideal and the expressive, adaptive qualities of the child. Ironically, these same qualities are viewed as inferior and of low status when one conceives of the teacher in relation to the social and occupational structure of society.

It is important for social scientists to probe the origins of image making—to distinguish between those images of teacher that arise out of history and culture, academic literature, the mass media, and memories from childhood. For instance, Willard Waller claims that much of the hostility between teachers and parents reflects the parent's negative experience as a child in school. The images of a tyrannical, authoritarian teacher-figure are carried out into adulthood and projected onto the teachers of their children. When parents greet teachers they are not likely to see them on equal terms, as potential collaborators, but they will respond as children to a feared and threatening authority. Waller asserts that productive and egalitarian relations between parents and teachers will not evolve until children have more positive experiences and perceptions of teachers that they can carry into adult life.[20]

The interrelated images of mother, teacher, and child are further magnified by the prevalent social attitudes toward women establishing a professional identity. The woman must justify her choice of life-style, and the locus of this justification lies in the family rather than in her professional work. One of the obvious ways women seek to establish an integration of their domestic and professional roles is to find work in the fields traditionally conceived as feminine. Choosing a profession like teaching provides a continuity of this sort. Interestingly enough, the blurring of distinctions between family life and the profession of teaching has provided social scientists with an opportunity to give less attention to the characteristics and qualities of the professional and work role. Such a continuity has led sociologists to assert the lack of commitment and attachment that women feel toward their work lives. Once again the

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ically excluded from schooling and who view school as the major avenue of cultural assimilation and social mobility, teaching is likely to be considered a lofty and laudable position. But characteristic of the academic, middle-class community is the expression of disdain for teachers—viewing teachers as servants of the community. These feelings of superiority are reflected in the perceptions and orientations of social science researchers.

20. Willard Waller, *Sociology of Teaching* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1932), pp. 58–59.

teaching profession is seen as a woman's secondary role that competes with her primary role as mother of a family. It receives, therefore, only peripheral attention from the sociologists, who do not seem to be interested in the teacher's conception of her work, her professional goals, and her maturation. So in a strange twist, mothers and teachers have become enemies, yet teachers are inevitably and ultimately (at the very core of their being) mothers. Does this lead to teachers having to magnify their separateness in order not to succumb to a biological role of mothering? As one teacher said to me, "I try my best to be *asexual* in the classroom in order not to be confused with mother or motherly-things."

Toward Resolving the Conflicts

The differences in the role behavior and perspective of parents and teachers in this society are real, but they should not inevitably lead to their mutual distrust and hostility. The differences have to do with the nature of the social structure and the economic and social slots that people hold in the system. The origins of resentment also rest with the lack of communication and the modes of exclusion that are sustained by the institutional arrangements of schools. The bureaucratic and inflexible structure of the school system encourages parents and teachers to feel that they do not have goals and agendas in common.

Nor is it beyond reason to imagine a healthy educational system responsive both to the particularistic focus of parents and the universalistic orientation of teachers. It is important to recognize the potential for creativity and growth in the conflicts between families and schools. The academic literature implies that homogeneity between the values, behaviors, and norms in the family and school will provide a more continuous, productive educational experience for the child than discontinuities. Although I support the notion that hostility and noncommunication between parents and teachers is likely to create barriers for children who are trying to make the transition from home to school, it is not necessarily true that dissonance between patterns of socialization, expectations, and goals will be detrimental to the child or dysfunctional to society. Philip Slater argues that in American society people have endured a historical pattern of chronic change which has created an "experiental chasm" between parents and children. This generational distance has, to some extent, invalidated parental authority and wisdom because parents have not experienced what is of central importance to the child, nor do they possess the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are adaptive to the conditions of contemporary society. This child-adult discontinuity is viewed by Slater as a natural lever for social change. Schools (and any other nonfamily-based collectivity) have served the important function of regulating and modifying parent-child relationships. "One

segregates children from adult life because one wishes to do something special with them—to effect some kind of social change or to adapt to one. Such segregation insulates the child from social patterns of the present and makes him more receptive to some envisioned future."[21] Dissonance between family and school, therefore, is not only inevitable in a changing society, but helps to make children more malleable and responsive to it. By the same token, one could say that absolute homogeneity between family and school would reflect a static, authoritarian society and would discourage creative, adaptive development in children.

Discontinuities between family and school become dysfunctional when they reflect differences in power and status. When parents and teachers perceive the origins of conflict as being rooted in inequality, ethnocentrism, or racism, then the message being transmitted to the excluded and powerless group (both parents and children) is denigrating and abusive. When schooling serves to accentuate and reinforce the inequalities in society, then it is not providing a viable and productive alternative for children. The message of ethnocentrism is conveyed to parents and children when socialization, acculturation, and learning within schools are defined in the narrow, traditional terms of the dominant culture. The negative and paternalistic messages are also communicated when schools begin to take on the total range of familial functions—not just matters of cognitive and social learning adaptive to a changing society but also the dimensions of primary socialization usually found within the family domain. Creative conflict can exist only when there is a balance of power and responsibility between family and school, not when the family's role is negated or diminished.

In an effort to initiate and sustain productive interactions with parents, educators must begin by searching for strength (not pathology) in children and their families. Teachers need to communicate praise and support for children so that criticism will not be viewed as a negative assault and so that children and parents will not begin to adapt their behaviors to negative expectations. There must be a profound recognition that parents are the first teachers, that education begins before formal schooling and is deeply rooted in the values, traditions, and norms of family and culture.

Positive relationships with parents are not merely related to a deep appreciation of different cultures, traditions, and histories, but also interwoven with the teacher's feelings of competence and self-esteem. If a person feels secure in her abilities, skills, and creativity as a teacher, then parents will not be perceived as threatening and intrusive. As

21. Philip Slater, "Social Change and the Democratic Family," in *The Temporary Society*, ed. Warren G. Bennis and Philip Slater (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 40. As early as 1932, Waller (p. 69) noted that a child will experience more freedom of expression when different demands are being made by teachers and parents.

teachers express the dimensions of personal authority rather than the constraints of positional authority, they will feel less need to hide behind the ritualistic barriers of institutionalism and professionalism. There is need, therefore, to clarify and articulate areas of teacher competence, to make more explicit the spheres over which teachers have ultimate and uncompromising authority and those areas where collaboration with parents could be an educational and creative venture.

Finally, establishing positive and productive relationships between the roles of parents and teacher, so entwined with women, means that the values and goals of our culture that shape the education and socialization of children must undergo a transformation that reflects more than the competitive and individualistic agenda of a male-dominated society, but also encompasses the special and valuable qualities that have been assigned to women. This redefinition of cultural norms will not only make the mother-teacher roles more esteemed and valued in the eyes of others, but also give greater meaning and purpose to those who *choose* to take on those roles—and inevitably clarify the various ways in which mothers and teachers can engage in collaborative and supportive relationships. One of the positive aspects of the feminist movement lies in addressing the transformation of social and cultural values better to reflect the psychosocial needs and characteristics of women. One hopes that the growth of the feminist perspective would have a positive impact on the relationships between mothers and teachers: through the transformation of societal values will come potentials for finding strengths in each other's work.

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