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Book Review

The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (Ballantine Books, 2003)

REVIEWED BY MITCHEL MALKUS

In today's culture, most, if not all schools profess the goal of developing strong partnerships with parents to ensure successful experiences and learning for their students. As Jack Wertheimer (2005) has noted with regard to Jewish education and Jewish day schools in particular, "Jewish families and educational programs do not operate in two separate spheres, but rather mutually reinforce one another…it is no longer helpful to look at families as divorced from the Jewish educational process, any more than it is useful to imagine schools and informal education as operating independently of families" (p. 8).

In her elegantly written and thoroughly researched work, *The Essential Conversation*, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot has produced a highly significant volume not about why a dialogue between parents and teachers is important, but about what makes this crucial exchange so difficult. *The Essential Conversation* marks a return for Lawrence-Lightfoot to the topic of her first book, *Worlds Apart* (1974), where she investigated the contours of family–school relationships surrounding the parent–teacher dialogue. In the current study, she has narrowed her focus to "explore the microcosm of parent–teacher conferences as a way of revealing and illuminating the macrocosm of institutional and cultural forces that define family-school relationships and shape the socialization of our children" (p. xxi).

Lawrence-Lightfoot is a sociologist by training and a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In *The Essential Conversation*, she employs the same form of ethnography, social science portraiture, that she has used successfully in her other research. Portraiture "is a method of

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qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life" (Lawrence Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). Instead of focusing on deficiencies, this research methodology seeks to uncover what is good and healthy in an attempt to apply the findings and conceptualize theory. One of the key characteristics of portraiture is the open use of the researcher's "voice" as a central research instrument. Lawrence-Lightfoot's return, some 25 years later, to the study of parent–teacher dialogue reflects both her voice as a mother of two children in their late adolescence and her personal autobiographical need to join analysis with action and intervention. The powerful portraits that she weaves with her own personal reflections and analysis make *The Essential Conversation* a compelling text. As Lawrence-Lightfoot shares her experiences as a mother sitting through parent–teacher conferences, the reader instantly feels the emotional nature of the subject matter for her as both a researcher and a parent.

The Essential Conversation begins with two rich chapters that frame the landscape against which Lawrence-Lightfoot observes the complex exchange and emotional dialogue of parent–teacher conferences. Between the "lines of [the] orderly, structured text of a practiced script," she notices "the chaos and emotion of a subtext that is often inaudible to the participants" (p. 218). As she accurately reflects, "[e]very time parents and teachers encounter one another in the classroom, their conversations are shaped by their own autobiographical stories and by the broader cultural and historical narratives that inform their identities, their values, and their sense of place in the world" (p. 3). The most poignant example is what Lawrence-Lightfoot terms the "Doorknob Phenomenon." Just as a parent–teacher conference is seemingly ending and a father heads for the door, he touches the doorknob, abruptly turns back, and passionately refers to a topic that was covered earlier in the meeting, and declares "that same thing happened to me in the fifth grade, and I swear it is not going to happen to my child" (p. 3). The words are delivered as an emphatic defense of the father's child with a threatening tone that "surprises even him" (p. 3). What is at play here, and in all parent–teacher conferences, are the deeply psychological themes and intergenerational voices that Lawrence-Lightfoot terms the "Ghosts in the Classroom."

Lawrence-Lightfoot offers her "voice" to this emotional conversation as she consciously makes the reader aware of her own ghosts. As in all ethnography, it is essential for the researcher to present her particular proclivities to the reader; in portraiture, this "voice" is felt throughout the narrative presentation of the data. Growing up as the daughter of middle class academics, Lawrence-Lightfoot was often the token African American girl in her school classroom. She recalls observing "the sharp dissonance of values between my home and my school" (p. xvi). Her parents picked their battles

carefully, pointing out minor infractions at home with quiet corrections, but spoke up at the blatant racial, misleading, and hurtful comments that her teachers made. Lawrence-Lightfoot recalls her second grade teacher, Mrs. Sullivan, who reported to Sara's parents that Sara's three-month absence from school for an illness would not only make it probable that she would need to repeat second grade, but Sara "might, just might not be college material" (p. xiv). What Lawrence-Lightfoot remembers most about the incident was not the wounding words, but her parent's tentative, awkward, and uncharacteristically demurred response to Mrs. Sullivan. Upon returning home, her parents emerged from a private discussion by saying that they knew Sara was capable of going to college and, moreover, they knew Mrs. Sullivan was wrong, and the best way to prove her wrong was for her to do excellent work. To this day, Lawrence-Lightfoot understood the primary message from her parents that she was "strong and resilient; that I could do anything I set my mind to; that I could overcome prejudice, malice, and stupidity with good work" (p. xv).

The difficulty of parent–teacher dialogues is due to the clash of values and ideals that often transpires in schools. In fact, drawing upon Willard Waller's classic text *Sociology of Teaching* (1932), Lawrence-Lightfoot even describes how parents and teachers can be considered "natural enemies." By the different roles and functions they play in the lives of children, parents tend to have a particularistic relationship with their children, while teachers view students within a more universalistic and dispassionate relationship. This description is troubling both to Lawrence-Lightfoot and to advocates of Jewish education. As the Wertheimer (2005) study points out, Jewish educators and Jewish parents see their spheres of influence on their children's Jewish education as mutually reinforcing. While this goal is commonly professed in Jewish schools, it is often left unfulfilled. Lawrence-Lightfoot sheds some light on the character of the relationship between parents and teachers in general when she insightfully remarks that "misunderstandings, misrepresentations, mistakes in judgment, and indiscretions are unavoidable and come with the territory." In fact, she feels that "one measure of candor and authenticity might be whether there is any heat, whether we see sparks fly" when parents and teachers get together. Anyone familiar with Jewish schools in North America can attest to the abundance of passion that parents and educators bring to their dialogues.

Lawrence-Lightfoot provides the reader with a number of chapters that focus on solutions to improving the quality of the parent–teacher dialogues. The two years of research and the dozens of teachers and parents whom she interviewed impressed upon her the need to focus the discussion of the parent–teacher dialogue on the child and the "truths the hand can touch" (p. 76) as the basis for conferencing. By this, Lawrence-Lightfoot means that evidence of student work is essential for telling the individual

stories of students and their progress. As Fania White[1] one of the teachers interviewed for the study recounts, "there is something about confronting the evidence and feeling my seriousness of concern that gives them (parents) relief…their eyes brighten and they are thankful" (p. 81). White was one of a number of teachers who used student portfolios as the vehicle for collecting and sharing such evidence. In this respect, the teachers reflect much of the focus in the contemporary educational literature on observable evidence as the basis for student assessment.

There is also a need to focus the parent–teacher dialogue on developing trust between the adult parties. Storytelling, keen listening, and profound understanding on the part of both parents and teachers are essential to the process. Of course, Lawrence-Lightfoot informs us that in order for such trust to be built, parents "must be willing to offer their version of the truth about their child" and to be honest about their child's strengths and weaknesses (p. 101). She suggests that those who are most successful in this dialogue "live on both sides of the table." "With parents whose values, histories, and life circumstances are more similar to the teacher's this trading of places is easier, more familiar, and natural. For others, the teacher needs to listen harder—to the text and the subtext" (p. 103). Lastly, it is imperative for teachers to make teacher–parent communication a priority in their professional work. When parents and teachers meet only twice during the year, and their communication is limited to those occurrences, it is highly unlikely that the type of mutual trust will be established to foster open, honest dialogue.

Despite the importance of the parent–teacher dialogue, all the teachers interviewed in the study were not unique in their "lack of formal preparation and training they received for working with families" (p. 228). All of the subjects in the study stated that most of what they do well with parents "results from trial and error and from learning that follows failure, from intuition and experience, or from witnessing and absorbing the ways in which their own parents and teachers encountered one another" (p. 228). Lawrence-Lightfoot offers three prerequisites for deepening and enhancing the quality of parent–teacher communication a) the extensive use of student artifacts as the basis for discussion; b) a focus on building trust between the adult parties; and c) increasing the frequency of contact between parents and teachers. In all cases, the schools that teachers teach in themselves, and not only the graduate schools that sought to prepare them, have an important role to play in supporting teachers and their continued development. Lawrence-Lightfoot asserts that schools must adopt "a stance of welcoming parents, seeking their alliance, listening to their perspectives, honoring their ways in which they see and know their child, and seeing them as a valuable and essential resource" (p. 236). Although it is not easy, the move toward

[1]All of the subjects referenced in the book are pseudonyms.

this focus must be viewed not as a distraction from teaching and learning but "as a necessary dimension of building successful relationships with children that will ultimately support their academic success" (p. 237).

The Essential Conversation invites its readers to consider the complexity and the emotional aspects surrounding parent–teacher conferences. It is an important work because it raises crucial questions concerning how parent roles are viewed in the educational process. Furthermore, it asks us to reflect on the dangers that lurk behind the ritual and ordered nature of the scripted dialogue that parents and teachers fall prey to every year. Lawrence-Lightfoot suggests a number of prudent ways to ameliorate the relationship between parents and teachers. In surveying this relationship, Lawrence-Lightfoot offers concrete ideas for how teacher training institutions and schools can better educate and support teachers to be successful in building healthy parent–teacher bonds. For Jewish education, and Jewish schools in particular, Lawrence-Lightfoot offers an opportunity to focus on a partnership that is often acknowledged, but infrequently utilized to its potential.

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