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## Translating Bourdieu into the American context: the question of social class and family-school relations

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### Abstract

This paper affirms the relevance of Bourdieu's arguments concerning schooling and inequality to the sociology of education in the US. In doing so, it eschews abstract debates about "reproduction theory" in favor of an empirically grounded treatment. We begin by noting that Bourdieu's theoretical account of the educational system's role in perpetuating inequality was tailored to an institutional arrangement which is highly distinct from that presently found in the US in at least one key respect: whereas for Bourdieu connections between the school and the domestic sphere are "hidden" or "masked," in the contemporary US they have become the focal point of a vast amount of educational research, discourse, and policy. Indeed, numerous institutional mechanisms exist which are intended to "harmonize" the environments formed by the home and school with respect to educational goals and practices. Our paper subsequently analyzes one of the most widespread such mechanisms: the parent–teacher conference. Using a set of detailed transcriptions of conferences between teachers and parents of middle-class children, on the one hand, and working-class and poor children, on the other, we examine the interaction that occurs in such conferences at the micro-level. It is our contention that, despite the institutional arrangement which prevails in the US, Bourdieu nevertheless provides the conceptual tools necessary to understand this interaction. Thus, within our data, stark differences are apparent in the amount and quality of the information exchanged in conferences as a function of the amount of cultural capital held by the parents. Similarly, parents' symbolic capital (relative to that of teachers) is associated with differences in the authority situation that characterizes the conference, with middle-class parents exhibiting a pronounced willingness to criticize teachers, advocate on behalf of their children, and demand customized pedagogical assistance for them. On the basis of this data, we conclude that institutional mechanisms such as parent–teacher conferences can function as an indirect avenue through which social class impacts children's school experiences.

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In American sociology, and particularly the sociology of education, the work of the late Pierre Bourdieu has attained a prominent place. In this essay, however, we assert that adaptation of Bourdieu's ideas to the US context requires more adjustment than has been carried out heretofore in empirical studies. Notably, we point to a fundamental argument in Bourdieu's thought concerning the "invisible" and "masked" character of the relations between the domestic sphere and educational institutions. We suggest that this argument should not be imported unexamined into analyses of education in the US, on the grounds that, in this country, a variety of policies and practices intended to "harmonize" the home and school environments have been institutionalized in a highly visible manner. Indeed, the professional literature has long stressed the importance of close, cooperative, and "positive" family—school relationships—especially in the earliest years of the educational process—and policy makers have formally mandated a variety of the resulting recommendations. Moreover, educators themselves typically view parent involvement and home—school communication as crucial aspects of children's education. These policies and practices, educational advocates claim, can ameliorate the effects that families' unequal class locations exert on children's schooling. We therefore argue that the US educational system differs from Bourdieu's account of the French educational system in significant ways. Importantly, it was this account that informed his theoretical arguments concerning the contribution that educational institutions make to the reproduction of the class system. Consequently, any application of his perspective must come to grips with this difference.

In keeping with Bourdieu's own preference for a grounded approach to conceptual problems, we attempt to address this issue empirically. We do so by examining one of the most commonly encountered forms of institutionalized home—school relations: the parent—teacher conference. It is our contention that, despite the existence and, indeed, centrality of these institutionalized relations in the US system of education, Bourdieu's more general sociological orientation remains valid. In particular, we argue that the institutional mechanisms that some authors claim have the potential to diminish the salience of social class (in this case, parent—teacher conferences) can, in fact, be suffused by its influence. In order to analyze the interaction that occurs in parent—teacher conferences, we draw on a unique set of conference transcripts that includes the families of fourth-grade students of a small group of teachers at two schools—one predominantly middle-class, the other almost wholly working-class and poor. We demonstrate that, within the confines of our sample, middle-class parents talked more, wielded educational discourse more effectively, and more overtly challenged the pedagogical authority of the teacher than did their working-class and poor counterparts. In doing so, middle-class parents exploited the conference to advocate on behalf of their children and to gain more individualized academic attention for them. Not all middle-class parents were equally assertive, of course, nor did their efforts always succeed. Nevertheless, social class clearly impacted the micro-level dynamics of parent—teacher encounters. In detailing this, we believe that our small ethnographic study remains consistent with Bourdieu's more general orientation to the sociology of education, while simultaneously acknowledging the relevant institutional particularities of the US educational system.

## 1. Data

As a point of contact between parents and teachers, the conference represents one of the most fully institutionalized manifestations of the home–school relation. Virtually all districts appear to require face-to-face parent–teacher meetings for elementary school aged children. However, these important arenas of contact are rarely studied with ethnographic methods, generally because there are formidable barriers to observation, including problems in access, confidentiality, and scheduling. This paper draws on a data set of tape-recordings of parent–teacher conferences of fourth-grade children who were part of a larger study of social class differences in parents' management of children's lives, including children's school and leisure activities.

The study involved six months of classroom observation (carried out by the second author, a white middle-aged woman) in a third grade classroom in “Lower Richmond” School, located in a large urban district in a northeastern city. (All names are pseudonyms.) Lower Richmond, situated in a white working-class neighborhood but drawing students from a poor housing project nearby, enrolls approximately 475 children from kindergarten to fifth-grades. The student body is approximately five percent Asian and Hispanic, 55 % white, and 40 % black. Over 3/4 of the students qualify for free lunch. School officials provided the names and addresses of parents as well as some basic background information about their education and occupation. With this information, the parents were grouped into categories and every 3rd name selected. During the summer, letters were sent to the parents requesting an in-depth interview. Interviews began in the late summer and, with the assistance of a racially diverse team, were carried out through the fall. Generally after the interviews were conducted, we asked parents for permission to observe the parent–teacher conference to be held in December of the child's fourth-grade year. In addition, in a few instances, the fourth-grade teachers at Lower Richmond gave the research team the schedule of conferences, and the research assistants asked the parents if the conference could be observed and tape-recorded.<sup>1</sup> The study also encompassed a second school, “Swan,” located in a middle-class, predominantly white, suburban area near the same city. Swan enrolled about 450 kindergarten through fifth-grade students, over ninety percent of them white. Most of the remaining students were African–American. The school did not have a free lunch program. At Swan, the classroom observations did not begin until spring of the third-grade year, and were resumed in the fourth-grade.<sup>2</sup> Letters went out in

<sup>1</sup> The logistics of gaining access to parent–teacher conferences are difficult to negotiate. As a rule, the conferences only last 15 minutes, there is no waiting area, and parents sometimes arrive exactly on time or late. There is usually no time to explain a study and have them sign a consent form. However, in the present case the second author had met many of the parents while the children were in third grade or had spoken with them on the telephone, as a result of the family's inclusion in the larger study. This greatly facilitated receipt of the necessary permissions. With a few exceptions, it was only parents who had agreed to participate in the larger study who were approached concerning the parent–teacher conferences. None of the parents who were asked refused. The response rate for participation in the larger study was over 90%.

<sup>2</sup> While the participant-observation in the third grade classrooms at both schools was carried out by the second author, the fall classroom observation at Swan school was conducted by a research assistant.

mid-fall and interviews took place later in the year. As a result, there are fewer observations of conferences at Swan than at Lower Richmond. All told, we have eighteen conference transcripts from Lower Richmond (with three different fourth-grade teachers), and seven from Swan (with one fourth-grade teacher).<sup>3</sup> Since Lower Richmond is an integrated school, the conferences we observed reflect this: nine are with white families, eight are with black families, and one is with an interracial family.<sup>4</sup> Swan, by contrast, is overwhelmingly white, and all of the conferences we observed there were with white families. The observations took place in December 1994.

The families were assigned to social class categories on the basis of detailed information collected in the interviews concerning the parents' occupations. Those with jobs involving managerial authority or highly credentialed skills were assigned to a "middle-class" category, and those whose jobs entailed neither were assigned to a "working-class" category.<sup>5</sup> In the case of two-earner families in which the parents' jobs implied assignment to different categories, the family as a whole was assigned to the higher category (i.e. the middle-class). We also added a third category, "poor," to encompass the substantial proportion of Lower Richmond families (many of them headed by single parents) for whom public assistance was the primary means

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<sup>3</sup> The fact that we only have one teacher at Swan poses a problem for our analysis since it is theoretically possible that the demeanor of middle-class parents was a response to her personal style of interaction (as well as her relative youth). Within the limits of this data set, we cannot definitively rule out this possibility. Still, we do not see it as likely. First, in interviews with parents in the broader study (which included several different teachers from various schools), middle-class parents (black and white) reported many interventions in education that working-class and poor families did not report. Second, in parent interviews, middle-class parents generally had far more detailed knowledge about their children's classroom experience than did working-class and poor parents, who tended to depend on educators for their knowledge. Third, in participant observation at the school sites, middle-class parents were much more assertive than working-class and poor parents in their interactions with teachers, routinely walking into classrooms without knocking, forcefully questioning teachers about aspects of their children's experience, complaining to teachers about small academic problems, and (in rare instances) launching formal complaints against school personnel when they saw the matter as serious. Thus, although we cannot satisfactorily address this problem with the available transcripts, other data from the study lead us to be confident in the analysis we report here.

<sup>4</sup> Mostly mothers carried out the conferences, but in Lower Richmond two conferences were attended by fathers/male guardians. At Swan, in four instances fathers accompanied mothers to the conference. One Swan father, a widower, attended the conference with his sister, who lived with the family. Although we discuss the influence of gender in shaping mothers' and fathers' actions, no clear pattern appeared by race. In other work (Lareau, 2002), the second author also did not find important racial differences, for example, between white and black middle-class parents in their interventions in schooling. Although black middle-class parents were wary that their children might experience institutional discrimination, their overall childrearing patterns inside the home as well as their strategies for intervening in their children's schooling were similar, and often indistinguishable, from those of white middle-class parents. There were striking differences between middle-class families, on the one hand, and working-class and poor families, on the other, but among the latter childrearing patterns were also similar across race (although the neighborhoods had very high levels of racial segregation). In this study, however, it is difficult to untangle this issue since there are a small number of parents and they are divided up among three different teachers who are themselves racially diverse. Given the limitations of this sample, the role of race in shaping parent-teacher relationships is not elaborated in this paper (but see Lareau and Horvat, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> There were no children of employers or self-employed workers in our sample.

of subsistence.<sup>6</sup> Like many schools in the US, the two we observed were deeply segregated by social class. As a consequence, all of the conferences we observed at Swan were with middle-class families, with the exception of one with a working-class family; likewise, all of those at Lower Richmond were with working-class and poor families. This means that we cannot untangle processes attributable to the class background of the families and processes attributable to differences between the schools.

## 2. Families and schools in Bourdieu's sociology

Much of Bourdieu and Passeron's *Reproduction* rests on a consideration of the relation between the domestic sphere and the school system. The domestic sphere, on the one hand, is understood primarily in terms of each family's "position in the system of class relations," and thus comprises the (biographical) starting-point for the determinations exerted by social class. More specifically, it is viewed as the site in which the class-specific habitus is initially formed<sup>7</sup> and in which a primary endowment of cultural capital is transferred across generations.<sup>8</sup> The school system, on the other hand, takes in students with varying dispositions and varying quantities (or types) of inherited cultural capital; as a consequence, its "meritocratic" selection and evaluation of students results in a process of *de facto* sorting according to social class origin. In this way, the school system contributes to the reproductive allocation of individuals to class locations, while also eliciting a wide-ranging recognition of the legitimacy of this outcome.

According to Bourdieu and Passeron, the connection between the domestic sphere and the school system is a thoroughly subterranean one. Indeed, in *Reproduction*, descriptions of this relation are awash in references to processes that are "hidden," "concealed," and "masked" (see, for example, Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 199–209). Likewise, the text's (infamously) dense theoretical chapter declares that the efficacy of the pedagogical work carried out by the school is contingent on the ped-

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<sup>6</sup> Thus, although we use the term "poor" as a shorthand designation for this group, the criterion for inclusion hinged on the source of income, not the amount.

<sup>7</sup> According to Bourdieu,

the structures characteristic of a determinate type of conditions of existence, through the economic and social necessity they bring to bear on the relatively autonomous universe of family relationships, or more precisely, through the mediation of the specifically familial manifestations of this external necessity (sexual division of labor, domestic morality, cares, strife, tastes, etc.), produce the structures of the habitus which become in turn the basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experience. (Bourdieu, 1977: 78).

<sup>8</sup> According to Bourdieu,

the initial accumulation of cultural capital . . . starts at the outset, without delay, without wasted time, only for the offspring of families endowed with strong cultural capital; in this case, the accumulation period covers the whole period of socialization (Bourdieu, 1987: 246).

agogical work previously carried out in the domestic sphere: “the habitus acquired within the family forms the basis of the reception and assimilation of the classroom message.” Nevertheless, the connection between spheres is typically “denied,” falsely rendering “the school career a history with no pre-history” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: 43). It is precisely because the school system effects this denial “in its ideology and practice” that it can simultaneously enable the inheritance of social position and obscure it.

It thus becomes apparent that the *critical* function which sociology can fulfill takes the form of uncovering mechanisms or processes that operate in the social world unseen. Bourdieu and Passeron write:

if there is no science but of the hidden, then the science of society is, per se, critical, without the scientist who chooses science ever having to choose to make a critique: the hidden is, in this case, a secret, and a well-kept one, even when no one is commissioned to keep it, because it contributes to the reproduction of a “social order” based on concealment of the most efficacious mechanisms of its reproduction and thereby serves the interests of those who have a vested interest in the conservation of that order (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: 218, note 34)

This is clearly how Bourdieu and Passeron understand their own work.

If Bourdieu’s sociology of education thus acquires its critical force from a capacity to unearth obscure mechanisms and processes—and above all, to reveal the opaque lines of connection between the domestic sphere and the educational system—then those who would develop this sociology in a different time and place may find themselves forced to confront a puzzle. For despite the endless ink that has been spilt in US sociology debating the merits and demerits of “reproduction theory” or “reproduction models,” there is a fundamental phenomenon which directly places into question any application of Bourdieu’s thought in this context—namely, the fact that the relation between home and school comprises the preferred topic of so much educational discourse. Indeed, under the rubric of “parental involvement” (or cognate terms), a vocal consensus on the importance of close, cooperative and congenial family–school relationships exists among educational professionals. This consensus thoroughly permeates educational research, policy, and practice.<sup>9</sup> The longstanding research tradition centering on home–school relations asserts the fundamental importance of an “overlap” between the goals pursued in different institutional arenas (i.e. home and school) (Epstein, 1987). This research has had a readily discernable impact on policy. For example, GOALS 2000, the most

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<sup>9</sup> There are, of course, different approaches to the study of family–school relationships. Waller (1932) proclaimed teachers and parents to be “natural enemies,” given the particularistic focus of parents and the universalistic concerns of teachers. This awareness, with few exceptions (McPherson, 1972), has generally faded as those who research family–school relationships decry that parents and teachers are *Worlds Apart* (Lightfoot, 1978). Overwhelmingly, social scientists focus on ways to bring families and schools closer (Coleman, 1987; Coleman and Hoffer 1987; Epstein, 1987). But see Connell et. al. (1982) for a more critical orientation, as well as Goldenberg and Gallimore (1995) for an interesting approach to the study of Latino families.

substantial piece of educational legislation passed during the Clinton administration, contains the following pronouncement:

The Congress declares that the National Education Goals are the following:

(8) PARENTAL PARTICIPATION—

- (A) By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.
- (B) The objectives for this Goal are that—
  - (i) every State will develop policies to assist local schools and local educational agencies to establish programs for increasing partnerships that respond to the varying needs of parents and the home, including parents of children who are disadvantaged or bilingual, or parents of children with disabilities;
  - (ii) every school will actively engage parents and families in a partnership which supports the academic work of children at home and shared educational decisionmaking at school; and
  - (iii) parents and families will help to ensure that schools are adequately supported and will hold schools and teachers to high standards of accountability.

Researchers claim that the appropriate forms of such overlap have the capacity to “empower” disadvantaged parents (e.g. Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Furthermore, because better educated parents tend to be more inclined to actively participate in schooling, school programs and teacher practices promoting parental involvement are taken to be important “equalizers” (Epstein, 1991) in distributing the putative benefits that accrue to such involvement; training teachers to “promote” parent involvement has thus become a pressing issue in discussions of teacher education (see Shartrand et. al., 1997). Consequently, adoption of policies intended to further the implementation of various forms of parent involvement is widespread at the school district level (Kessler-Sklar and Baker, 2000). Indeed, despite the decentralized nature of the US educational system, and the resulting variations across states and locales in the way education is organized, officials at all levels promote the importance of regular, cooperative family–school communication and interaction with near-unanimity.

Given this institutional context, the general issue of continuity or discontinuity between the home environment and the school cannot be considered “hidden,” “concealed,” or “masked” when one analyzes the contemporary US education system. Although, as we show below, this by no means obviates the impact of social class, the institutionalization of the home–school relationship implies that the US system takes on contours distinct from the one described in Bourdieu’s theoretical and empirical writings on education. In other words, this system cannot be viewed

simply as an instantiation of the “traditionalistic” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: 99–100) one that formed the object of Bourdieu’s research and criticism during the 1960s.<sup>10</sup>

However, if Bourdieu’s sociology never encompassed an educational system with institutionalized home–school connections, we nevertheless maintain that this by no means obviates the value of his more general sociological orientation. We do so by undertaking an ethnographic analysis of parent–teacher conferences, one of the most intensive points of contact between home and school. On the basis of our data, we argue that the institutionalization of home–school relations can, in fact, serve to create new avenues for the influence of social class to impact children’s education. Moreover, it is precisely in the work of Bourdieu that the tools needed to analyze these avenues can be found. In what follows, we first describe the setting of the parent–teacher conferences we observed and the basic elements of the interaction that took place. Although conferences are brief encounters, they have a routinized and quasi-ritualized character. However, within the parameters of this routine, substantial variation can be detected. Second, we therefore examine differences in the quality of communication that occurred as a consequence of disparities in the amount of cultural capital that parents brought to the exchange. And, third, we demonstrate that within the conferences, a small-scale contest over pedagogical authority can be identified, one which took on highly distinctive contours depending on the class location of the family. It is variations in the relative quantity of symbolic capital held by teachers and parents, we maintain, that drove these contests.

### 3. The setting: rituals of cooperation

Parent–teacher conferences are generally relatively quick, informal encounters. Nevertheless, they do have a quasi-ritualized, partially stereotyped character. To the extent that this is the case, they are oriented towards affirmations of the principle of *partnership* (Lareau, 2000: 15ff.). As (“official”) representatives of the family and school institutions, respectively, parents and teachers each seek from the other recognition of their efforts on behalf of the child’s education and, more generally, acknowledgement for having promoted a “learning-friendly” environment.

At both of the schools in which we carried out observations, conferences took place in the teacher’s classroom at a time when classes were not in session. (At Swan, children were dismissed for the entire day, while at Lower Richmond, the school had three “half days” with early dismissal.) Although teachers were willing to accommodate requests from working parents to schedule a conference before school or to hold it over the phone, they generally took place between 9:00 a.m. and 3:45 p.m.

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<sup>10</sup> This is especially true with respect to the elementary level, where the emphasis on parent involvement is strongest. It is worth noting, if only in passing, that Bourdieu devoted very little of his research to French primary education, preferring instead to focus on the University system—another point rarely acknowledged by critics or defenders of “reproduction theory”.



Beforehand, the parents stood in the halls of the quiet school waiting to be beckoned into the classroom. At Swan, the teacher often (but not always) shook hands with parents, especially fathers. The conferences lasted only 15 min. The parent(s), teacher, and researcher sat in wooden chairs around a standard school table. (In one classroom, however, the teacher remained seated at her desk and had the parents sit in chairs next to the desk). The conference began with the teacher presenting the child's report card to the parents. They then studied it while the teacher talked about the child's school performance. Teachers often, but not always, asked parents if they had any questions. At the end of the conference the teacher asked the parent to sign a form indicating that the conference had been held. Overall, conferences were generally attended by mothers at Lower Richmond (although we observed three conferences with fathers or male guardians unaccompanied by their wives). At Swan, a number of conferences included fathers as well as mothers. However, as we note below, fathers often sat some distance back from the table and played a less active role in the conference than did their wives, interjecting occasional comments or small jokes. In these instances, fathers' attendance appeared to be an important symbol of their concern for schooling, while the overall responsibility for closely monitoring schooling lay with their wives, a pattern noted in other research (Lareau, 2000).

At Swan, children were not included in conferences. At Lower Richmond, they were present on occasion, but were generally quiet and almost wholly uninvolved; a guidance counselor or a reading specialist was also present for a few of the conferences. In both schools, the conversation dealt separately with the child's academic and non-academic (behavioral) strengths and weaknesses, as evaluated by either the teacher or the parent. (The amount of talk devoted to academic and non-academic matters varied as a result of differences in the nature of the child's problems or a parent's concerns.) As a rule, the teacher presented an illustrative or exemplary piece of the child's work to the parent during the discussion of academic matters. At various stages of the conversation, we observed parents taking opportunities to express (directly or indirectly) their concern for the child's education and appreciation of the teacher's efforts. They also provided accounts of the effort they had expended, offered up descriptions of the "positive" aspects of home life, and sought to demonstrate their intimate knowledge of the child's educational strengths, weaknesses, needs, etc. These expressions often revolved around the presence of books in the home and the child's positive reading habits; monitoring of (and assisting with) homework was also frequently mentioned. Conversely, we also observed the teacher take numerous opportunities to demonstrate his or her general competence, along with sensitivity to the child's individual "learning style," and to itemize his or her own efforts on behalf of the child. Thus, comments from the teacher often provided detailed accounts of progress in specific subject areas and particular work he or she had undertaken to remedy a shortcoming; elaborate descriptions of the child's temperament also occurred. Whatever their other functions, these types of statements, as offered by parents and teachers, served to affirm a commitment to participation in a partnership.

Considered only in terms of their ritual elements—that is, in abstraction from their other functions—the conferences exhibited relatively few direct social class differences. Rather, the most evident differences appeared to be indirect, stemming primarily

from variations in the children's typical academic performance and behavioral problems. However, parent–teacher conferences are not simply ritualized demonstrations of good intentions. Conferences also entail an exchange of information concerning the child's progress, needs, and “interests.” As such, our data suggest that they are also beset by various impediments to communication partially analogous to those that fascinated Bourdieu in his analysis of pedagogical interaction itself (Bourdieu, et al., 1994; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 19–23, 70–106).

#### **4. Didactic exchanges**

Some of Bourdieu's earliest work on education concerned obstructions to pedagogical communication stemming from “the presumption that students know—because they ought to know—the underlying code of the professorial message” (Bourdieu et al., 1994: 5). Steeped in a highly restricted literary and intellectual culture, he maintained, teachers unwittingly practiced a brutal “class ethnocentrism” by making this presumption. (These arguments became the basis for Bourdieu's subsequent assertions concerning the role of inherited cultural capital in generating disparate educational outcomes.) It is the emergence of just this sort of dissonance between the communicative “code” used by educators and that internalized by students in the home environment which early parent involvement is, in large part, intended to prevent. By clarifying for parents the expectations that the institution holds for their children and the means it uses to realize them, and by informing parents of what they need to do in order to facilitate their children's transition from one “code” to the other, policies and practices emphasizing parent involvement are meant to bring such gaps to light, and to help compensate for them as early in the educational career as possible. Despite these intentions, however, our data indicate that those aspects of parent involvement that entail regularized, systematic communication between educators and parents (such as conferences) are often beset by obstructions at least loosely analogous to those that Bourdieu pointed to: the parents themselves are differentially endowed with the cultural capital necessary to absorb a teacher's message, resulting in stark variations in the “quantity of information” that is actually exchanged (see Bourdieu et al., 1994: 4–5).

In the context of the parent–teacher conference, this is apparent, in the first place, through a simple comparison of the relative amount of talk offered up by middle-class parents, on the one hand, and their working-class and poor counterparts, on the other. In conferences with the latter, the teachers are typically responsible for the overwhelming proportion of the speech; parental responses are often limited to a sentence or even a single word. An example is provided by an exchange between Ms. Steiner, the white, working-class mother of a Lower Richmond student, and her daughter's teacher, Ms. Goldberg, a white, middle-aged woman, with a resigned air:

Teacher: With the spelling it's a little different. I give them the whole sentence and they have to actually copy down the whole sentence. I do like dictation. I do this because it teaches them a lot of different skills. First of all, it teaches

them to listen and it also takes spelling out of just a list...and puts it into everyday use. And I also use words that we have gone over in class. ... Also, we do punctuation skills, capitalization skills. ... So it's a good review of everything. I also get to see what they're doing. I check their handwriting. ... And our spelling now, for the first time, we have spelling work books that go with our spelling books and our phonics books incorporate what our spelling books teach. It's a blend. [...] Gina's reading level is 3.2. Now she came to me on 3.1 which was a whole year behind. ... When I tested them, ... she came out to a 3.2. So in two months time she went up a book level, which is good. By the second report period I expect her to be up with the reading level and hopefully. ... she'll be ready when she enters fifth-grade to go into a fifth-grade reading book. [...] The other thing [is that]. ... the benchmark program, because it's new to Lower Richmond. ... a lot of parents were concerned that it was a special ed class or it was for testing for special ed. It has nothing to do with special ed, absolutely nothing. It's for children that just seem to be below [grade level] and we want them to get caught up before they get into the middle school. So we have a fourth-grade benchmark and a fifth-grade benchmark. Uh, Gina, the way she is working right now, probably, I don't know if she'll be going into a fifth-grade benchmark. I mean, she's functioning very well in this class and if she tests out she would probably go into a regular fifth-grade class. And the other thing, because some of the children will go on back into a regular fifth-grade class and some will go to benchmark, I still do the regular fourth-grade curriculum. So it's not that she's going to miss any skills, you know, from fourth-grade. We still have the regular fourth-grade math. We still have the regular skills that she needs to be taught. The only difference is that I have 16 students and I have a teaching assistant and we get lots of money to take trips and lots of money for books and literature and computers and calculators because we really feel if we can help the average kid and get them caught up—a lot of money has been spent on the real bottoms and the real tops, but the average kid. ... just has a little bit of trouble and maybe a little intensity might help them and Gina fits into that. Uh, let me see—she's on 3.2 so I'm happy with that. Math she's doing good in multiplication but she still had a lot of trouble with subtraction and borrowing and her number facts. And I've been telling parents that the easiest way to get kids to learn how to do number facts, especially fourth-graders, they love to play games so the best way to learn is to play games with them. And if you have a deck of cards at home you can do all her number facts. You don't have to go out and buy flash cards. You can just play war. Do you know how to play war?

Ms. Steiner: Yea.

Teacher: And then you turn it over and say, if this is multiplication you'd say, if this was 4 times 4, what is it? [...]

(The majority of this teacher's remarks have been excised for reasons of space.) Similarly, during the participant-observation at Lower Richmond, in the rare

instances when parents came to school, we often observed working-class and poor parents playing a reactive role, whereby they responded to the teachers' queries rather than initiating conversation. They did not often volunteer ancillary information, were relatively passive, and had a silent demeanor. During conferences, working-class and poor parents also often appeared visibly uncomfortable, looking down at the floor and shifting uncomfortably in their chairs with apprehensive expressions.<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, in our observations of interactions at Swan, we found that middle-class parents were more at ease than parents at Lower Richmond (even given the fact that some of the middle-class parents looked slightly anxious, especially as they entered the conference). Middle-class parents often "took over" the conversational space, as this mother, Ms. Hopewell, does when she enters the conference carrying a cup of coffee and chattering away while the teacher waits to begin:

I went and bummed a cup of coffee which always makes me happy. My husband said, "You've got to give up coffee." I said, "Honey, coffee is my best friend. It's warm. It makes me feel good and it's always there." He said, "Hmmm, you have got to branch out a little sweetie." [laughter.]

Although not all middle-class parents were as talkative as Ms. Hopewell, they generally appeared relatively comfortable at school, putting their arms across nearby chairs, telling little jokes, and the like. In addition, in the discussions between teachers and middle-class parents, teachers did not monopolize the interaction. Middle-class parents often volunteered information and asked questions. Nor would they reply only to the teacher's final comment if confronted with a lengthy, meandering account of their child's school performance that ranged across multiple topics (as with the remarks above from the Steiner conference). Indeed, after patiently waiting for the teacher to finish, the middle-class parents would, as a rule, carefully select out a topic of particular concern and direct the conversation towards it. They generally felt free to offer lengthy anecdotes of their own when they deemed them germane, often as a way to steer the conversation. This is apparent in a more or less spontaneous remark offered by Ms. Handlon—the white, middle-class mother of a daughter with severe learning difficulties—in which she asserts that her daughter's performance in school is not indicative of her true capabilities:

Well, self-confidence has always been her problem. She gets intimidated easily in the school setting. Now, her grandfather came yesterday. There was a grandparents day at the middle school so he came to be with my 8th grader and then he came to work and met me and I said, well, Melanie has a half day, why don't you take her out to lunch and talk about school and some of the problems she was having and he came back after taking her to lunch and said, "I

<sup>11</sup> In some families where the researchers conducted extensive home observations, the contrast between the demeanor of the mother at home, where she was lively and talkative, and at school, where she was withdrawn and hunched over, was dramatic. See Lareau (2002, 2003).

can't believe she has a self confidence problem." He said, "this little lady sat with me at lunch and talked up a storm," and she doesn't see her grandfather a lot so it's not like she's super comfortable with him. But in school she's totally different, totally. And I've seen her come out of it a little bit this year.

In conferences with middle-class parents, teachers could take on the role of the passive listeners.

Beyond these disparities in the amount of talk, however, differences in parental cultural capital were manifest more concretely. Thus, for example, in his conversation with Ms. Goldberg, Mr. King—a black, working-class father (and a high school dropout himself)—unsure of exactly what he should do about his daughter's poor spelling, retreated into the promise of motivational support:

Teacher: Well, . . . her spelling words are words that she just needs to study every week, and they're just basically words that when she's writing she should know how to spell at her level. . . ; when I look at her spelling, she's failed her spelling and that's really just a question of rote memorization.

Mr. King: Well, see, what we're gonna do now is encourage her to stay in that book and we're gonna be right there to encourage her with all sorts of knowledge.

In a similar vein, when asked to comment on the potential effectiveness of the commercial reading aid "Hooked on Phonics," Ms. Carroll, the young black mother of a girl at Lower Richmond, whose daughter lived full-time with her grandmother (Ms. Carroll's mother) in a local housing project, was unable to assess it in specifically pedagogical terms:

Teacher: I was asking [another parent] how she felt about . . . Hooked on Phonics. . . . Do you like it?

Ms. Carroll: I don't like the cassette. I'd rather have maybe the video and the cassette, but just. . . them [the kids] being there with the cassette tends to be kind of boring. . . . Tara is like, "I don't want to do this"; but she's doing it.

Teacher: A couple of parents had asked me about it and I said, well, I don't know anything about it.

Ms. Carroll: It's OK. It's just—maybe if there was some type of visual contact that you can actually see along with the cassette.

Teacher: I see, but it's just the cassette.

Ms. Carroll: Yea and books.

The gap between the discourse familiar to working-class and poor parents and the discourse used by educators to communicate with them extended to matters directly constitutive of the children's schooling. Much of the jargon routinely used by teachers during conferences—including terms such as “word attack skills,” “whole language approach,” “sentence skills,” and “number facts”—had little concrete meaning for these parents. Moreover, working-class and poor parents at times displayed confusion about the standards by which their children's progress could or should be assessed, and were therefore forced to depend on the teacher for even the most rudimentary sense of its adequacy or inadequacy. This can be seen in an exchange that occurred between the poor, black woman, Ms. Taylor—whose son Tyrec was reading at a third-grade level in the fall of his fourth-grade year—and the boy's teacher, Mr. Tier, a white, middle-aged, man who could be brusque:

Teacher: . . . he's reading in the second part of the third grade reader.

Ms. Taylor: Which is actually not great.

Teacher: Well, it's not great, but I have some students who came in on the first third grade reader and are still there. So . . .

Ms. Taylor: So actually if he gets to the fourth by the end of the year it will be OK?

Teacher: No. I think that Tyrec can and should get to the fifth-grade reading level by the time he gets out of here. Now, I'm not guaranteeing that but based on Tyrone's focus now and his attitude as far as class work goes I see no reason why he couldn't be on grade level in reading. . . .

The tendency of working-class and poor parents to rely on teachers for evaluations was extremely pronounced in certain cases. During a conference with Ms. Driver—a white, working-class mother whose (fourth-grade) daughter was reading at a first grade level—Mr. Tier was so distraught in the face of what he perceived to be parental hesitation that he bluntly declared, “if it was me, if our roles were reversed, I'd be beating me on the head.”

Uncomfortable when trying to employ the institution's discourse on learning, yet still compelled to demonstrate their commitment to the partnership they share with the teacher, working-class and poor parents were therefore liable to fasten on to the more tangible “props” of education, should the opportunity arise to do so. This is apparent in an exchange between Ms. Cook—the poor, black aunt (and guardian) of a Lower Richmond student—and Ms. Stanton, an African-American teacher, concerning the child's math grade:

Teacher: [. . .] Math—the “D.” Now, . . . if you look through some of her papers she had problems with subtraction. That was the hardest thing for her and she didn't know her number facts.

Ms. Cook: Well, I'm getting her help with that now.

Teacher: Right. I've been telling parents to get a deck of cards.

Ms. Cook: I have three of them.

Similarly, other working-class and poor parents were quick to point to the presence of books and newspapers in their homes, should the teacher report that their children exhibited language problems. Thus, for example, Mr. King informed the teacher that the family owned a number of dictionaries—though without being completely sure whether they should be invoked as a tool for helping ameliorate his daughter's deficiencies with vocabulary or spelling or both.

Middle-class parents' greater command over educational discourse came through, above all, in their propensity to ask frequent, relatively pointed questions about academic (as opposed to behavioral) matters. The particular questions varied, of course, as a function of the child's academic situation (unusually strong, average, unusually weak) vis-à-vis particular subject areas (language, math, etc.). Moreover, they tended to range across various topics, including the finer points of the child's performance or the teacher's educational procedures. Nevertheless, academic questioning was a nearly universal feature of conferences with middle-class parents.

At times, this questioning took on an overly psychological cast, compelling the teacher to speculate about the inner life of the child. Thus, Mr. Caldis a white, middle-class father, was worried that the progress of his son—a highly successful student—might be impeded by a lack of understanding on the part of the teacher, Ms. Nettles:

Mr. Caldis: Do you think he has a tough time interpreting what you mean? Is he looking for something deeper than what you're saying?

Teacher: No, I just think he wants to make sure he's got all the facts.

Mr. Caldis: Yea. He doesn't want to mess it up.

Teacher: Exactly. And he doesn't want to mis-interpret anything that's said.

Ms. Caldis: Do you think he's worried about messing up?

Teacher: You know...he could be to the point where he's overly conscientious. I don't know why. But he seems somewhat at times nervous about messing up, if you want to say that.

Mr Caldis: Do you think he's trying to please you more than he's trying to please himself?

Teacher: I definitely think that he is probably wanting to please you and myself

because I think he looks for a lot of approval and a lot of, “hey, you’re doing a great job.” But I think he’s probably doing it, bottom line, for himself.

Similarly, another middle-class mother proposed that differences between the sexes in processes of brain development might explain her daughter’s problems in math, before querying the teacher extensively about whether working in the same group as boys noticeably affected the child’s self-confidence.

Issues of “creativity,” “risk”-taking, and “challenge” loomed large in conferences with middle-class parents. However, in other instances, questioning was directly tied to matters of practical concern. In her conference with Ms. Nettles, for example, Ms. Handlon worried that her daughter’s time with a reading specialist might actually impair her performance in a reading class, since the two overlapped:

Ms. Handlon: So she does miss her language arts time in the classroom when she goes out to see the reading specialist?

Teacher: Oh, yes. Those three days. I think it’s, whatever, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday.

Ms. Handlon: And are you doing basically the same stories in both classes?

Teacher: For the most part, absolutely, yes. [...]

In order to assuage Ms. Handlon’s anxiety, Ms. Nettles went on to provide an extensive account of the coordination between her class and the reading specialist’s, listing stories that had been covered in both settings, and explaining the (presumed) benefits of having the specialist familiarize Melanie with the material before the child encountered it in the regular class.

While all parents demonstrated a concern for their children’s grades at some point, middle-class parents were distinctive in their attempts to locate a child’s precise position on the assessment continuum. This too provided opportunities for querying the teacher, as can be seen in an excerpt from the conference between Ms. Hopewell, a white, middle-class mother, and Ms. Nettles:

Ms. Hopewell: Now, do you think that this is [representative of] Alison’s level of performance or do you think she could be doing O’s [i.e. “Outstanding” work]?

Teacher: Well, I think probably Alison could do S plus [i.e. work slightly above “Satisfactory”]. . . . The second marking period, I think, she’ll be getting a lot more S pluses. If she works really hard I could see her getting an O. I don’t think she’s—

Ms. Hopewell: No, I don’t think she’s an exceptionally bright student but I do think that Alison could do S plus, [if not] O work.



Teacher: Absolutely. If she puts forth the effort on her part, and that's why I say—

Ms. Hopewell: She's right on the fringe.

The (implied) questions Ms. Hopewell posed about the difference between her daughter's actual performance and her potential have a discernable payoff: the teacher went on to suggest that Alison could raise her grade above the "fringe" by attempting the "extra credit" problems included in the class' math assignments—a course of action that Ms. Hopewell, unaware of the "extra credit" option, found appealing.

Middle-class parents also exhibited a capacity to isolate and examine the precise grounds for a teacher's assessment. While in some cases this enabled them to better pinpoint their child's problems and to craft (with the teacher) a specific solution, in others it served to open up the teacher's evaluative system for discussion. For example, Ms. Tallinger, the mother of a Swan student, accomplished the latter by drawing a distinction between the form of her son's work and its content, and then asking the teacher to explain the relative importance assigned to each:

Ms. Tallinger: I mean, this is my concern. When I look around at some of the projects that they [the other children] hand in, I mean, some of these just seemed so beautifully prepared, and Garret's content may be all right but it's not as slick and whether it's computer prepared or...

Teacher: It depends, though, but I know that sometimes the children work completely [alone] on it and some children have parents helping, so you have to always weigh the two; but if you know that the child is doing it totally on their own then they may be more deserving of an O than another child whose mom and dad do it.

This capacity to draw these sorts of distinctions in the course of a fifteen or twenty minute conference simply has no analogue in the discourse of working-class and poor parents.

Finally, middle-class parents set themselves apart by their interest in their young children's performance on standardized tests. To be sure, this was to some extent due to the fact that the teachers at Swan frequently raised the subject during conferences, whereas, interestingly, those at Lower Richmond almost never did. Nevertheless, whether rational or compulsive, the parents of Swan children were usually curious to discuss the subject. The curiosity of some parents extended only as far as the testing schedule—that is, seeking clarification about which tests (IQ or achievement) are administered in which year of school. Other parents, however, such Ms. Imes, were eager to know the results, as in this conversation with Ms. Nettles:

Ms. Imes: But this year it's just the IQ test?

Teacher: Yea. And they changed . . . 3rd and 5th grade to doing the standardized, and then 4th grade the IQ.

Ms. Imes: Do parents get to know what the IQ results are?

Teacher: I believe that the results go home to the parents. They're directly sent from the main office.

Ms. Imes: Oh, good. That will be interesting.

Among the admittedly small number of cases in our sample, the middle-class interest in standardized test results appeared to stem not so much from a preparatory mentality (according to which children should begin practicing for the SATs early in life), but from a comparative one: the parents wanted to contrast their children's performance to that of other children in the school and other children nationally. (And the teachers sometimes offered to send them aggregate results for this purpose.) It would thus seem that the tests served as a kind of benchmark against which to assess the efficacy of the "reproduction strategies" they had been pursuing at a mid-point in the race.

## 5. Authority contests

The parameters laid down by the principle of "partnership" provide a basis not only for an exchange of information between parents and teachers; they also leave a great deal of room for maneuver. And, within this space, we were often able to discern clashing assertions of authority—almost never overtly antagonistic, yet still readily apparent—over the child's education.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the participants did not, as a rule, treat the "partnerships" that actually existed as fully symmetrical relationships. Elementary school teachers inhabit an indistinct location in the occupational hierarchy: not fully recognized as "professionals" (which they deem themselves to be), they are nonetheless generally considered to be situated somewhere above those who toil at more routinized forms of "white collar" work (as well as those who perform manual labor) (Etzioni, 1969). This renders their status vis-à-vis working-class and poor parents relatively clear; however, in the case of middle-class parents—such as managers or (fully recognized) "professionals"—things are not as transparent, and teachers can sometimes find themselves treated in ways that do not accord with their self-image (see Lareau, 2000: 29ff.). In the course of the parent-teacher conferences, middle-class parents sometimes claimed for themselves the "right" to offer a definitive assessment of their children's achievements, or to evaluate the teacher who evaluated their children. In other cases, they allowed themselves to slide from the role of partner into that of advocate. In yet others, they sought to customize their child's education by requesting efforts from the teacher intended to assist their child

<sup>12</sup> Teachers themselves are not unaware of the presence of this type of conflict (see Lareau, 2000: 29ff.).

individually (Lareau, 2000; Useem, 1992). Working-class and poor parents, by contrast, were considerably less prone to implicitly or explicitly question the legitimacy of the teacher's authority. Believing that educators should be in charge of children's educations, they tended to be relatively passive in parent–teacher conferences (see Lareau, 2003: Chapter 10).<sup>13</sup>

The authority situation in conferences is indicated by matters already addressed. As was discussed in the preceding section, the propensity of teachers to steer the discussion and monopolize the talk in conferences with working-class and poor parents—and the tendency of the parents to accede to this form of conversational interaction—implied a substantial degree of deference on the part of the latter; middle-class parents, in contrast, spoke considerably more and were also more likely to direct the conversation. This being said, the authority relations that animate the conference were also readily apparent in the tendency of middle-class parents to voice complaints or advocate on behalf of their children. This type of behavior was highly uncommon among the working-class and poor parents in our sample. Indeed, on the basis of the independent interviews we carried out, we became aware of some working-class and poor parents who harbored a deep antipathy towards a particular teacher or towards the school in general. For example, Ms. Yanelli, a white, working-class mother, expressed substantial anger towards the school, believing that her son, Billy, was sometimes disciplined unfairly (see Lareau, 2003: Chapter 11). Nevertheless, none of her concerns were voiced during the conference. Moreover, in those instances in which we did observe a working-class or poor parent venture a concern on behalf of the child, there was little willingness to press the issue. Thus, when Ms. Silverman, the white, working-class mother of a Lower Richmond student, relayed an assertion of her son's concerning homework, the teacher simply denied it and moved on:

Ms. Silverman: He says you don't check it [homework], neither.

Teacher: I check it at least three times a week. I mean, there are some days where I just don't get to it and...it gets sort of shoved into the corner, but for the most part I do check the homework. But again, I like to try to keep them guessing. So, I guess we're—if you don't have any more [questions] I think there may be someone waiting...

This dismissal stands in contrast to comparable exchanges involving middle-class parents. In these cases, parents tended to patiently and persistently confront the teacher with purported shortcomings. A lengthy exchange between Ms. Imes and Ms. Nettles provides a good example:

<sup>13</sup> Conversational interactions between school officials, on the one hand, and students or their parents, on the other, comprise one of the paradigmatic instances of what Bourdieu, in his work on language, identified as a “linguistic market” that is “completely subject to the dominant norms” (1991: 97–98; see also Bernstein, 1971). As such, they presuppose an institutionally circumscribed “competence” that includes, as one of its components, a *status-linked* sense of one's right to speak-or better, to undertake certain “performative” uses of language, such as evaluating, advocating, and requesting (etc.).

Ms. Imes: The only thing she has a real problem with is when she's pulled out for instrumentals and for enrichment. She says—OK, this is her version—that, uh, she comes back in to get her assignment or to make up a test. . . , [and] I hate to say this, but she'll say that you don't let her make up the test or you don't let her get the assignment. How is that coming through? Is that not anywhere close?

Teacher: No. Uh, basically with the enrichment, it's their responsibility to get the assignment, so what she'll say is, "can I go to Mrs. Comer?" Like, . . . one day. . . I sent them. As soon as she came back, she said, "I have homework tonight and. . . I wasn't in science"; so I just said, "well, just go over." So, for the most part—

Ms. Imes: She's focusing on some spelling test that you wouldn't let her make up, that she still hasn't made up. She feels bad about that.

Teacher: Well, . . . we usually on an average have 6 to 7 spelling tests per marking period. If they miss one it's not gonna affect their grade that much.

Ms. Imes: She thinks it will.

Teacher: And I had said to them, "oh, don't worry about it." Like, not in a negative way, like, "oh, we're not gonna make it up. . . ."

Ms. Imes: Well, she misunderstood that. I think she feels that you slighted her for not being here so she doesn't get it and her grade will be less. I think that's the way she's thinking. The same with the place value. . . chart. . . . She doesn't think she got graded on that because it got mixed up with the million dollar project.

[. . .]

Teacher: No, not at all. Well, I can talk to her about those two things, then. But hers were in that pile and when I gave them back she said, "that's not my collage," and I said, "oh, you're right and her collage was right underneath." They were put together.

Ms. Imes: You know that face: "Mrs. Nettles—she lost it and then she didn't give me a grade."

Teacher: Well, I did, and it was an O, actually, yea.

Ms. Imes: She'd love to know that.

Particularly interesting in this exchange is the fact that the mother, while clearly not convinced of her daughter's complaints, is able to use them to probe the teacher's

behavior in order to discover something which, in her view, does merit criticism: poor communication with the child. In this fashion, some of the middle-class parents exhibited a capacity to criticize teachers on behalf of their children that could almost be described as artful.

Additionally, as in other conferences we observed in which two parents were present, Ms. Imes, rather than her husband, played the predominant role. Not only did Mr. Imes speak less, but his physical stance also showed his more distant role. Ms. Imes and the teacher both sat erect, with their chairs pushed up to the edge of the table and their knuckles entwined (i.e., folded together in a prayer position). Mr. Imes, however, sat back from the table, in his dark suit, white shirt, and tie, with one leg folded over the other and his arm stretched out resting on his knee. He listened, and occasionally chimed in with comments, but did not ask probing questions, have a list of items that he wanted more information on, or draw the teacher out on particular issues. As with other fathers in our sample, he appeared to defer to his wife.

To be sure, the criticism voiced during conferences with middle-class parents did not flow down an exclusively one-way street. From time to time, teachers took issue with some aspect of parental behavior (though usually in highly implicit terms). Ms. Handlon, for example, is an object of complaint (albeit muted) for Ms. Nettles in certain respects:

Teacher: She comes in very late. She usually is the last one here. I mean, I don't even mark her absent any more. Does she take the bus?

Ms. Handlon: No. The last week and a half to two weeks it's been harder getting her here. I mean, we have been having a little bit of the, "I don't feel well," "my throat's sore." So it's taken a little longer to get motivated and get out the door but we, we've talked about that.

Teacher: Yea, usually, unfortunately, she's the last one here by like 5 minutes.

Ms. Handlon: And the kids start the creative writing as soon as they get in?

Teacher: Yes. But some kids are here as early as ten minutes to 9:00, so if she's coming at ten after they've already had a 20 minute head start. So, maybe just getting started a little bit earlier would be helpful. But usually I even send up a lunch count before she's usually here and then I'll ask her if she wants anything but that's usually late compared to when we do our morning activities.

Ms. Handlon: We will work on that.

Ms. Nettles, in this instance, did not voice the frustration that she often expressed informally over Melanie's lateness and its effects on her academic progress. Moreover, in general, criticism of parents, when it occurred in conferences at Swan, tended to be restricted to issues (like on-time arrival) that are unambiguously the

responsibility of the parents, and which had little or no margin for contrasting interpretations.

The structure of the authority relation also came through clearly when a teacher took it upon himself or herself to lecture the parent and then evaluate his or her understanding of academic matters. Among the conferences we observed, exchanges of this sort were almost wholly restricted to those with working-class and poor parents. An excerpt from the discussion between Mr. Wilson, a black father (separated from his wife) who worked in a blue-collar job, and his son's teacher (Ms. Goldberg) provides a good example: the parent, in this case, is assessed on his ability to distinguish the topic of writing from that of handwriting.

Teacher: ...in his reading work...he went from a "B" to a "D."...When they do responses and writing to reading, answering questions, comprehension questions, Michael did not do what he needs to be doing.

Mr. Wilson: And what's that as far as his writing?

Teacher: Right. Writing. I'm not talking about handwriting now. I'm talking about writing a story that responds to...

Mr. Wilson: In other words if he reads something he has to comprehend...

Teacher: That's it. Write what it was about. Write a summary. Tell me about the characters. Tell me about the middle, beginning and end. I'm sure that he's capable of doing it. You need to work at it.

Mr. Wilson: He's got comic books and things like that. I'll have him write little stories to explain to me what's going on, figuring that as long as he's reading that's the important thing...

Teacher: Yea. He needs practice in doing that. He needs to write complete sentences. Again, when I mention writing I'm not talking about handwriting or penmanship, I'm talking about...

Mr. Wilson: Expressing ideas.

Teacher: Exactly.

In this exchange, the parent's capacity to understand pedagogical discourse became the object of a quasi-pedagogical evaluation.

The authority situation can also be observed in the fact that middle-class parents freely offered their own elaborate appraisals of their children's performance and capabilities. At times, these assessments entailed at least a partial rejection of those proffered by the educators (as in the quotation from the preceding section, in which Ms. Handlon suggested that her daughter's grades did not accurately reflect her

abilities). Even when they concurred with the teacher, however, middle-class parents still felt impelled to make the assessment their own. Thus, Ms. Hopewell, after an extensive discussion of her daughter's grades and a detailed account of her strengths and weaknesses, declared:

Ms. Hopewell: So that's where I am with Alison. I think she is weak in math. I think her strong point is reading and the English side, the writing and the reading. She reads Edson's books. And she'll come in and she'll say, "oh, this is so exciting." She'll say, "listen to this." And she'll read part of this book. So I think she's pretty much, at least up to class level, if not above, with her reading.

Teacher: Yea. Absolutely. . . .

The exchange hence involved a brief "role reversal," with the teacher placed in the position of assenting to an authoritative diagnosis—something we observed in other conferences with middle-class parents.

Similarly, middle-class parents were sometimes willing to publicly assess a teacher's strengths and weaknesses. This took various forms, including comparative evaluation. Ms. and Mr. Caldis provide an example of this sort of parental behavior in their complaints about their son's teacher from the previous year, which they share, unsolicited, in their conference with Ms. Nettles:

Ms. Caldis: I think we also mentioned how much he really likes this style. I think your style of teaching matches him well. Mrs. Brown was a little less organized. She was creative and had her own positives but her style was a little different for Brian.

Mr. Caldis (chiming in): I'm really happy he's in your class because, you know, your youthful attitude, I think Brian needs that. I don't want to see him with somebody that was more of a disciplinarian rather than let them open their heads up a little bit. You probably come into this with all that going for you.

Teacher: Well, thanks, I hope so.

Some middle-class parents were thus quite open about the evaluative stance from which they view teachers.

In a number of the conferences we observed, parents made requests of teachers. This was true of some working-class and poor parents, although it was relatively rare. In one case, Ms. Farringer, a white, working-class mother, insistently appealed for more homework for her son:

Teacher: Do you have any questions?

Ms. Farringer: No. I just think he should be having more homework than he

has. My other two children are loaded with homework compared to him and I think he just needs a little more. He's thrilled with what he gets and he's mad that I'm telling you this but I really feel that there should be something more.

[The teacher responds by asking the boy what she suggests that they do every night, which is to read for 20 minutes]

Teacher: Well, you know, every teacher does something different.

Ms. Farringer: Yea. I know. They do. But he's thrilled. He just loves this.

[. . .]

Teacher: Well, I think every teacher gives a different amount.

Ms. Farringer: I know last year, wow, he had way too much homework. He had Ms. Green and he didn't like that at all. . . . This year is like a breeze. . . .

Teacher: . . .I'll keep that in mind, and I'm sure Joseph will be happy to get some extra assignments. . . .

Although she demonstrated a pronounced willingness to confront the teacher over an issue of importance to her (a willingness that, it bears repeating, is relatively unusual within our working-class and poor sample), Ms. Farringer's request remains distinct from those that the middle-class parents we observed frequently made. In particular, Ms. Farringer's did not directly ask that the teacher undertake actions on behalf of her child exclusively (although that is how this teacher ultimately responded). The requests made by the middle-class parents in our sample, by contrast, often entailed a more or less explicit attempt to *customize* children's education.

In certain cases, middle-class parents sought to individualize some aspect of their child's education simply on grounds of convenience. For example, Ms. Imes wanted to ensure that her daughter's homework assignments do not interfere with the family's vacation:

Teacher: So that Monday you'll be gone?

Ms. Imes: Yes. That whole week. Is there some homework or something that she could do that wouldn't be every textbook from every classroom to lug on the plane?

Teacher: I can make a note of that and let you know. . . .

In other cases, however, it was more than convenience that motivated parents, and the special efforts requested of the teacher could be ongoing. Thus, Ms. Handlon,



whose daughter was far behind in her spelling skills, routinely requested that Ms. Nettles send home lists of spelling words weeks in advance of the test:

Ms. Handlon: She missed the last spelling list altogether. Friday I guess she was out sick and she never got the list. ... So she took this test without having the list to study from.

Teacher: Did you see her today? It went home. OK. I will get you the next, let's say, five lists.

Importantly, it was Ms. Handlon who initiated this system, and she had come to expect that the teacher would accommodate her. Indeed, she did not hesitate to ask the teacher to help direct the private tutor she had hired:

Ms. Handlon: OK. We have some tutoring set up for her with math. What would you recommend that we have this tutor work on with her?

Teacher: I would be more than happy to prepare things for the tutor to do.

Ms. Handlon: OK.

The severity of Melanie's learning problems undoubtedly contributed to the quantity and quality of the demands that Ms. Handlon made of educators. However, even middle-class parents of well-performing children often did not hesitate to request individualized forms of attention from their children's teachers, albeit ones smaller in scope.

## **6. Conclusion**

Bourdieu's sociology of education is rooted in the premise of an educational system that assumes that "the school career [is] a history with no pre-history." Because it denies the existence of a connection between the domestic sphere and children's school experiences, the formal equality practiced by educational institutions systematically privileges those from certain class backgrounds and disadvantages those from others. For Bourdieu, it was precisely by shining a spotlight on the "dennegated" question of the relation between home and school that sociology could reveal the contribution that education makes to class reproduction, thereby fulfilling the discipline's critical vocation.

In the US, the situation is somewhat different. Far from being denied, the question of a continuity or discontinuity between home and school animates ever-more educational research and policy. Indeed, under the banner of "parent involvement," a host of procedures have been institutionalized with the intention of "harmonizing" the home and school environments; for many, the resulting expectation is that disadvantages attributable to social origin will thereby be ameliorated. Nevertheless,

although this institutional arrangement departs in substantial ways from the account that undergirds Bourdieu's theory and research, it is our contention that his more general orientation remains apposite.

In order to develop a provisional demonstration of this contention, we have taken up the subject of parent–teacher conferences, one of the cornerstones of schools' attempts to promote parent involvement. Using a unique ethnographic data set, we have focused on two aspects of conferences: the exchange of information and the authority situation. Our data suggest the presence of stark disparities by social origin in both. The middle-class parents in our sample demonstrated a greater capacity to absorb educators' assessments, diagnoses, and recommendations, and to elicit potentially useful information from them, than did their working-class and poor counterparts. Social class differences were also apparent in the authority dynamics that permeated the conferences: middle-class parents were more likely to challenge teacher's evaluations of their children and to evaluate the teachers themselves; they were also more likely to request (and receive) efforts from the teacher intended to deal with children's needs or problems on an individualized basis. On both of these dimensions—information and authority—the middle-class parents proved to be capable of securing tangible benefits for their children more effectively than working-class and poor parents.

Our data thus indicate that, far from ameliorating disparities attributable to social origin, parent involvement policies provide new avenues for their influence. This being the case, the question arises of whether these avenues might themselves be amenable to reform. For example, programs intended to publicize to all parents the standards against which teacher performance can be evaluated have been suggested as one such possibility. Such programs, in effect, imply that parents should be educated not only to participate in their children's education, but also to help monitor and oversee their schooling.<sup>14</sup> While we certainly believe such policies should be tested, we also feel there are grounds for some skepticism. One of the most striking aspects of the conferences we observed at Swan (and one that is hard to convey) was the deftness with which the middle-class parents were able to react to the unfolding situation, whether steering the conversation in a particular direction or couching a criticism of the teacher in an innocuous sounding platitude. This “feel for the game” likely contributes to their effectiveness, and cannot easily be inculcated. Furthermore, it is difficult not to suspect that these parents' capacity to assert themselves vis-à-vis the teacher also derives in part from their social position and from the teacher's knowledge of it (even if unconsciously).

Whatever the potential strength of re-crafted parent involvement policies, they also carry a certain danger that must be borne in mind. As soon as “the family” assumes the role of an equal “partner” in educational discourse and policy, the risk

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<sup>14</sup> Rothstein (2002: B7) describes an intriguing program in Texas run by the Industrial Areas Foundation. At participating schools—all of which have low-income, largely minority student populations—the Foundation installs a paid “parent support specialist” who, charged to act on behalf of parents, essentially coaches them before meetings with teachers. The purpose is both to inform the parents and to reduce any tendency towards unnecessary deference. The specialist will also work with parents to advocate for their children concerning specific issues, whether disciplinary or academic.

arises that attention will be deflected from the school. To the extent that this occurs, responsibility for the educational trajectories followed by the students who, as a result of their social origin, are least likely to succeed could be directed back upon their families, thereby absolving the schools. In the US, it is the prospect of this outcome that, in our view, presently calls for a critical vigilance on the part of sociologists.

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