UNDERSTANDING AND IMPROVING PARENT TEACHER PARTNERSHIPS IN A MIDDLE YEARS CLASSROOM

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Teresita Mayne
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Abstract

I felt that by improving my understanding of how the stakeholders experience the partnership relationship, my deeper understanding would inform my practice. In turn, it would assist me in becoming a better educator. I chose to use the action research approach when I conducted this study because I recognized this process as being one that extends from and complements my day-to-day practice. Parent, student, and teacher Focus Groups were used in an attempt to develop an understanding of how the various stakeholders experience parent teacher partnerships. The research questions that guided this process were:

Within the Middle Years context:

1. What does it mean to partner with parents?
2. How do parents, teachers, and students experience the partner relationship?
3. What practices enhance the partner relationship?
4. What role do students play in the partner relationship?

Parents were involved in Focus Group meetings, interviews, Demonstration of Learning evaluations and summative evaluations. Students were involved in Focus Group meetings, interviews, Learning Log reflections, Demonstration of Learning evaluations and summative evaluations. Teachers were involved as Critical Friends, indicating their perceptions and experiences, but also in examining the other participants' comments. As well, I maintained a research diary as a reflective tool.

The study, conducted over a six-month period, provided opportunities for all stakeholders to voice their thoughts and perceptions and to develop an image of how each experiences partnership. I did, in fact, come to a deeper understanding of

stakeholders' perspectives. However, I had a couple of unexpected outcomes. First, I discovered that the partnership relationship has a mutually educative element. That is, while the teacher presents new information to the parent, the parent has a unique understanding of the child which can provide new information to the teacher. A second unexpected outcome was the discovery of the dialectic between the personal and professional sides in teaching. Teachers need to have a professional side to develop credibility and instill confidence in the eyes of parents. However, teachers need to develop their personal side in provide credibility to their students. In the end, by better understanding each stakeholder's unique perspective, I developed a richer understanding of 'lived experience' and its impact on my educational context. In turn, this understanding heightened my ability to be a more effective practitioner.

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CHAPTER ONE

AWAKING TO THE POSSIBILITY OF PARENT TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

The Genesis

> Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible without surrender be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, ... Be yourself. Especially, do not feign affection. ... Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be, and whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul. (Ehrmann, 1997, p. 245)

This poem was framed and hung on my paternal grandparents' kitchen wall for as long as I can remember. Words to live by for my grandfather, they seemed to guide his every action. I have a clear recollection of the quiet respect that he showed all people and the honest way in which he approached each relationship. Grandpa enjoyed people, working with them, talking with them, and interacting with them. It was this kind of a milieu in which I was immersed and I have come to appreciate. Grandpa knew the value of establishing and maintaining positive relationships.

My grandfather has since passed away and my grandmother has moved from the family home into a senior citizens' complex. That poem went with her and is displayed prominently in her apartment. Max Ehrmann (1997) understood what it meant to relate to people and how to build relationships.

The Seed

Kevin, a twelve-year-old student assigned to my Grade 7 class, was new to the school. A highly intelligent and articulate child, obviously raised in a home that encouraged decision making and critical thinking, Kevin frequently voiced his

opinion often directly challenging the rationale behind classroom activities. We worked through these moments attempting to establish a positive relationship. As the year progressed, Kevin developed a circle of friends and began to adapt to our Middle Years environment. "Middle level education is the segment of schooling that encompasses early adolescence, the stage of life between the ages of 10 and 15" (National Middle School Association, 1995, p. 5) and is synonymous with middle level education.

About March, Kevin's friendships abruptly changed and he began to 'hang out' with a more rebellious crowd. His in-class behavior deteriorated and he became much more negative. Now, his challenges were directed at me, personally, and were intended to curry class favor rather than to question rationale. Becoming quite concerned, I kept him after school one night after he had accused me of 'picking on him' and 'never giving him a break' and his parents of 'always siding with [me].' While these are not uncommon complaints of the average Middle Years student, they were unusual for Kevin. Explaining my concerns over his actions, I broached the subject of peer pressure. The ensuing discussion was quite productive as Kevin recognized that he had allowed his peers to influence his behavior. The meeting ended with the feeling that we had made some positive progress and had arrived at a mutual understanding.

The next morning began with a telephone call. Kevin's father, Charles, had called to ask about Kevin's actions leading up to and the events of the previous afternoon. I outlined my discussion with Kevin, including the explanation that his parents were his advocates as well as I and that we approach him from different

directions but our goal is the same. I stressed that we both want what will benefit him, even though Kevin may not always like nor appreciate our efforts, but that we must work together for his long range growth. Charles explained that his purpose in telephoning was to clarify the events and to express his sincere thanks for my rational approach in working with Kevin. Further, he explained that if all teachers were willing to commit to children and to parents in this way then children would be the ultimate beneficiaries.

For me, change is a slow and often tedious process requiring much soul searching and self-analysis. It took Charles' telephone call to confirm that three-way partnership (student - teacher - parent) is a positive atmosphere in which to carry out "action changes" and student growth. In this instance, I recognized the parent and the teacher had opened student centered communication.

The Seed Finds Fertile Soil

About four years ago, one of my graduate classes on assessing literacy in an elementary setting challenged students to undertake a practical project using an action research approach. In this class, my focus became an examination of parents' role in the assessment and evaluation of their children. Much to my dismay, I found very little written on the specific topic. The existing literature identified general methods of involving parents in school, focusing on parent volunteer programs, communicating with parents, and communicating evaluation plans. Relatively little of the literature addressed empowering parents and involving them in assessment. Despite this initial setback, the prospect of empowering parents captured my interest and became my project topic.

Three major themes emerged by the end of the project that assisted me in a better understanding of my own practice. First, students wanted a more active role in their own assessment. Second, most parents did not feel qualified to be involved in the student assessment and evaluation process, but appreciated meaningful ongoing communication. Finally, parents generally were satisfied with the level of school to home communication. The findings from my project indicated the need for an innovative design for encouraging input from students, parents and me and the need to ensure a balance of one (school to parent or parent to school) and two way communication (parents and teachers in dialogue with one another).

These themes provided a conceptual framework of methods that best effect change. The need to identify and prioritize these changes was my next step. The emerging metaphor helped to clarify my thinking. Change can be likened to climbing a ladder rung by rung with each rung representing a modification in practice. The effort of mounting the ladder is directly proportional to one's fear of heights (or fear of change). My change priority was to effect a modification in assessment, evaluation, and communication strategies. Before attempting to scale the ladder of change, I needed to make decisions regarding what to change and the change process. It required a series of small steps. If I tried to climb the ladder all at once taking two and three rungs at a time, I may miss a step and fall. However, if I took my planning into account and then took 'baby steps,' the task would become much easier. Mounting this ladder required a great deal of time management. The day was sufficiently long. My time just needed to be reorganized. An area of interest for my thesis began to emerge.

In order to have the most effective three-way educational environment, all the stakeholders must have an active role. Students should be engaged in active, student-centered activities requiring critical thinking, situational analysis of events, and decision-making. Teachers need to be involved actively in the classroom activities with their moving from role of instructor to that of a facilitator. They need to share the classroom planning and decision-making with the other partners. Parents also need to be considered. How can their talents best be utilized? How can the old school home barrier be breached so that parents feel actively involved in their children's education? The topic for my thesis gradually unfolded.

The Seed is Planted

Schooling involves three primary stakeholders - students, teachers, and parents. Each must be reasonably represented in the process. This relationship of stakeholders is often portrayed as a triangle, indicating a sense of equality amongst partners, however, when examined in more depth, it becomes evident that equality is not only nonexistent but unrealistic. Parents, teachers, and students draw from vastly different experience pools and make unique contributions. To say that an equal relationship should exist between the three is a fallacy. Role definition, therefore, becomes the key to understanding the interactions between the three stakeholders. In doing so, teachers need to exercise caution. Within the stakeholder relationship, teachers have more power. They evaluate the child and determine, in the end, whether a child passes or not. Therefore, teachers must undertake role definition with sensitivity and tact. However, by defining each stakeholder's role based upon his or her background, one ensures that each vertex of the triangle participates in the process

in a way that is adequately responsive to his or her abilities. What begins to emerge is a role definition in which an outline is formed of what each stakeholder brings to the educational setting.

What unique set of experiences, understandings, and perspectives does each stakeholder bring to the educational setting? Teachers are well versed in the facilitation of learning. Their training and experience enable them to assist students to grow and develop as individuals, both academically and socially. Parents have loved, raised, and housed their children and have an in-depth knowledge of their children's capabilities and the nurturing process. Students, finally, are at the center of the educational process. Their individual growth and development must direct all interactions. Each vertex offers some specified needs and knowledge that enhances the overall relationship yet is unique unto itself. There is no demand for equality of action or interaction. Each perspective is unique yet the commonality of purpose remains.

Max van Manen (1990) explains that while teachers and parents approach education from two potentially different perspectives, their aim is the same. "Pedagogy is the activity of teaching, parenting, educating, or generally living with children, that requires constant practical acting in concrete situations and relations" (p. 2). Teaching includes both teachers and parents in their particular contexts working continually with students on whatever tasks are unique to each setting. In a later work, van Manen (1992) reiterates this point.

> Parenting and teaching derive from the same fundamental experience of pedagogy: the human charge of protecting and teaching the young to live in this world and to take responsibility for themselves, for others, and for the continuance and welfare of the world. (p. 6 - 7)

Van Manen not only defines "goal" but also states explicitly that parents and teachers possess the same "goal."

Jeff Orr (1997) echoes this notion of different perspectives working toward a common goal. "The way [the] various voices, with their differing intentions and meanings are shared and interpreted, provides an opportunity to explore meanings constructed in a collaborative context" (p. 250). Orr provides a tangible way to view the synthesizing of perspectives. Parents and teachers have "various voices, with their differing intentions." Both stakeholders approach schooling from varied backgrounds and differing contexts. However, the joint goal is to share and interpret meanings.

This conscious effort to share and to interpret meanings establishes the basis for a study of stakeholders' perspectives and the meaning that they draw from educational interaction. My topic, therefore, is concerned about better understanding parent teacher interactions and using this understanding to inform and improve my practice.

"Although [the stakeholders] had different interests in the collaborative relationship, they complemented each other" (Orr, 1997, p. 254). Each parent of each student approaches parent teacher interactions in a slightly varied manner; however, each parent's goal remains to ensure the best possible educational experience for his child. Each teacher approaches each parent teacher interaction with the goal of ensuring the best possible educational experience for each child.

This unity of purpose or goal creates an interesting partnership of stakeholders. This term, partnership, is deliberately used to describe the unique

interaction of parents and teachers. Swick (1992) helps to define the term parent teacher partnership.

> The partnership construct is based on the premise that collaborating partners have some common basis for action and a sense of mutuality that supports their joint ventures. Teachers and parents have a common need for joining together in partnership: the need to foster positive growth in children and in themselves. (p. 1)

Swick points out that the "joint venture" or mutual goal is supporting children's educational experiences. He underlines the necessity for the partnership by alluding to the general benefit of "positive growth in children." It is significant that Swick identifies partnership as fostering positive growth in parents and teachers as well as in children.

Susan McAllister Swap (1993) also uses the term "partnership." "Home school partnership is no longer a luxury. There is an urgent need for schools to find ways to support the success of all children" (p. 1). While her intent is to emphasize the necessity of a combined parent teacher effort to ensure successful experiences of students, her use of the term "partnership" raises interesting implications. Partnership implies a joint effort or working together to achieve a similar goal.

McAllister Swap and Swick succinctly describe the nature of the parent teacher relationship as it applies to the educational process, reinforcing the necessity for mutual goals. From this notion of partnership comes my thesis topic. My topic is about better understanding and improving the practice of parent teacher partnerships, investigating what it means to partner with parents, how parents, teachers, and students experience the partner relationship, and what practices enhance the relationship.

Specifically, the questions that I investigated within the Middle Years context were:

1. What does it mean to partner with parents?
2. How do parents, teachers, and students experience the partner relationship?
3. What practices enhance the partner relationship?
4. What role do students play in the partner relationship?

An investigation of these questions helped to deepen my understanding of the parent teacher relationship as a special and unique relationship. With a deeper understanding of its nature, perhaps my practice of partnerships will be improved.

The Pathway to Improved Partnerships

The Research Process

From January 1999 to June 1999, I conducted my research using an action research approach with two cycles, each lasting about three months. I established three Focus Groups (a parent, student, and teacher Focus Group), drawn from a Grade 7 and 8 classroom. Over the course of the research, each participant was involved in two Focus Group meetings and some participants were involved in one interview. The teacher Focus Group functioned specifically as critical friends (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 1993, Kember, Ha, Lam, Lee, Ng, Yan, & Yum, 1997) providing feedback on my practices and on the issues and ideas presented by the other two Focus Groups.

Direction for the Research Process

A good friend of mine gave me an e-mail subscription to "Chicken Soup for the Soul: Home Delivery." Everyday, an inspirational reading arrives in my 'inbox.'

One day I received "One Moment Please," with the first line reading "So, how do you develop a relationship?" The author, Barry Spilchuk (1996), was conducting a Relationship Service Seminar for the YMCA and was caught unprepared for a question posed by one of the seminar participants. "We had been talking "theory" all day and this woman wanted some concrete methods for developing client or, for that matter, any relationship" (Spilchuk, 1996, p. 32). After recounting his personal experience, Spilchuk concluded, "How do you develop a relationship? One moment at a time!" (p. 32).

This particular passage seemed timely to me as I had been pondering this very question within the context of my situation for a long period of time. Relationships form the basis for everything I do as a teacher. They form the basis of my interactions with colleagues, students, parents, support personnel, and agencies. In all facets of my work, I must know how to develop a relationship. Yet, at times, it seems as if these relationships are developed almost unconsciously or are accepted as just being there. Rather than spending time to cultivate and to nurture them, I take them for granted and move on with my work. I believe, however, that without strongly developed relationships, my job is impossible. Consequently, Barry Spilchuk's remark of building relationships "one moment at a time" became an excellent starting point for my research.

From this starting point, in Chapter Two, I attempt to ground this research within the current literature. I examine existing Saskatchewan and Regina Public School policies regarding parent involvement. As well, I develop a background for

the importance of and need for information regarding parent involvement, focusing particularly on Middle Years education.

Chapter Three outlines this research as action research and attempts to rationalize its data sources and processes as being based upon an action research approach.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the study and attempts to paint a picture of the process itself by examining my journey. I pull together the issues raised by the three Focus Groups and draw out some common ideas among them.

Chapter Five examines the findings from Chapter Four and attempts to identify themes and engages in "pedagogical reflection" and "pedagogical theorizing" (van Manen, 1982, 1990). It examines the evolution of my thinking with regard to my new understanding of the partnership experience.

Chapter Six orients the research and its findings within a practical context, examining some of the philosophical issues raised and grounding them within my present educational context. I explore how my practice has changed as a result of this research.

How did this research process unfold? "One moment at a time!"

CHAPTER TWO

PARENT TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS IN THE RESEARCH

Action: Does the literature cover relevant aspects of the situation, and of change in that situation?
Research: Is relevant theoretical and research literature on the situation adequately covered? Are all claims tested against the more specialized research literature? (Dick, 1997)

Parent involvement has been an objective of teachers and of the educational system since the beginning of the twentieth century. Over the years, the way in which this involvement manifests itself has changed. The change process has been a gradual evolution of thought, of wants, and of practice. Initially, the educational goal regarding parent involvement was to inform parents and then, only to involve. Now, however, it is shifting toward the empowerment of parents and toward forming partnerships with them in order to address the educational needs of children.

Introduction

One of the goals and functions of a school is to promote growth in students. Middle Years students are a unique group who require a unique approach. Lounsbury (1996) cites the work of The Council on Adolescent Development who acknowledges that one way to promote such growth in Middle Years learners is by "[re-engaging] families in the education of young adolescents" (p. 1). The belief is that by "[re-engaging] families," teachers will be able to recapture the interest and enthusiasm of middle level youth.

According to George & Lawrence (1982), Middle Years students are characterized by a conflicting set of needs: a need for separateness balanced by a need for belonging. "Separateness means both privacy and retreat from group

involvement" (p. 22) and "the term 'belonging' [means] belonging with, not belonging to" (p. 23). Adolescents have a need for stillness "[meaning] muscular relaxation and lowered brain rhythms" (p. 22) balanced by the need for physical activity. Amidst all of these contrasting needs, Middle Years students attempt to develop a sense of autonomy and identity, all of this usually occurring through the exclusion of adults and most often their parents.

The National Middle School Association was established in 1973 to "serve as a voice for professionals and others interested in the education of young adolescents" (p. 41). In 1982, the position paper, *This We Believe*, was first published to articulate professional guidelines for working with Middle Years students. It was reprinted several times and in the most current reprinting (1995), it presents six conditions that "developmentally responsive middle level schools" should exhibit (p. 13). The fifth condition outlines a focus on family and community partnerships (p. 17). The mention of partnerships in this landmark document underlines the importance for "[re-engaging] families" (Lounsbury, 1996, p.1). Eccles & Harold (1993) suggest that because of the nature of the Middle Years student, "schools could play a critical role" (p. 569) in assisting with their growth and development.

> [Adolescents] also need close relationships with nonfamilial adults to help them sort through independence and identity issues, especially since achieving increasing independence from one's parents is a primary task of this developmental period. In our society, teachers are likely to be the primary nonfamilial adults in many adolescents' lives. ... Teachers can have a major positive impact and may even play a protective role in the lives of adolescents. This is particularly true if they work in concert with the adolescents' parents. (p. 568-569)

"[Working] in concert with the adolescents' parents" (p. 569) becomes the crucial issue for teachers of Middle Years students. Teachers become the critical link between the home and the school as students attempt to distance themselves from their parents. Throughout their children's search for autonomy and identity, parents continue to be interested in their children. Teachers, therefore, can assume the role of liaison between parents and students, if teachers choose to develop this particular role.

Definitions

Partnership

Susan McAllister Swap (1993) proposes "A New Vision: The Partnership Model." She "describes an alliance between parents and educators to encourage better schools and the success of all children in school" (p. 47). She defines partnership as "[encompassing] long term commitments, mutual respect, widespread involvement of families and educators in many levels of activities" (p. 47). Melissa Marie Aronson (1995) expands upon the definition by explaining that "partnerships are formal or informal contracts in which each partner agrees to furnish a part of the resources and labor for an enterprise and by which each shares in some proportion of the success or failure" (p. 4). Kevin Swick (1992) synthesizes the definition of parent teacher partnership.

> The partnership construct is based on the premise that collaborating partners have some common basis for action and a sense of mutuality that supports their joint ventures. Teachers and parents have a common need for joining together in partnership: the need to foster positive growth in children and in themselves. It is their challenge to create a sense of mutuality so that their efforts are meaningful to all those involved. (p. 1)

Therefore, partnership as used in this research refers to parents and teachers working together cooperatively and collaboratively, having mutual goals, responsibilities and rights with the intent of fostering positive growth within students.

Communication

Melissa Marie Aronson (1995) defines communication as "the exchange of thoughts and messages by speech, signals, and writing. Communication implies two-way interaction with each party serving as both sender and receiver" (p. 3).

Middle School Student

This term refers to students generally in grades five to eight. Donald Eichorn uses the term transescence (George & Lawrence, 1982) to "represent the stage of development that begins prior to the onset of puberty and extends through early adolescence. A transescent ... is a young person in transition from childhood into adolescence" (p. 2). This term is used interchangeably with middle level learner, young adolescent, or Middle Years student.

Parent

According to Saskatchewan Education (1997), a parent "[refers] to a child's significant care-giver. This may include a child's mother, father, grandparent, aunt, uncle, brother, sister and special or legal guardian. These people are responsible for supporting the education of the children in their care" (p. 1).

Existing Policy Regarding Parent Involvement

In 1984, Saskatchewan Education, the provincial governing body for education in the province of Saskatchewan, published its final report on the three year curriculum review process. The review's purpose was to "[assess] the adequacy of

the K-12 programs in meeting the present and future needs of Saskatchewan students" (Saskatchewan Education, 1984, p. 69). The resulting document, *Directions: The Final Report*, provided a new vision and orientation for curriculum development and thus, education, in Saskatchewan with its recommendations. Core Curriculum, the Adaptive Dimension and Common Essential Learnings are examples of the products of this massive systemic review.

Within this landmark and paramount Saskatchewan document, reviewers recognized and repeatedly commented on the importance of relationships between the home, the school, and the student. As well, the document specifically commented that

> relationships between student, teacher, home, and school were seen to be of the utmost importance and in need of improvement. Parents want to feel welcome and at home in their children's schools, and many expressed a desire to become more involved in schools. (p. 20)

A characterization of the relationship is alluded to in the "School Environment" section.

> Parents want a more personalized atmosphere in their children's schools. ... [Personalized atmosphere] refers to the feeling or spirit that pervades the school. ... The committee chose to focus on the personal and social relationships that exist in schools. A healthy school environment is characterized by the presence of such things as trust, respect, satisfaction, ... warmth, caring and support. (p. 38)

In this passage, reviewers have outlined parents' wishes as well as having provided a picture of what the realization of these wishes might be; however, they neglect to make any recommendations that specifically address parents and their role.

Further to school environment, parent involvement is mentioned as a part of the discussion regarding "Support Services." "Parents in particular want to become more involved in their children's education and can play a vital role in the functioning

of the school" (p. 40). Again, the importance of parent involvement as well as their desire to be involved is mentioned.

Having repeatedly mentioned the importance of parents and their involvement in their children's education, the document fails to recommend any course of action or any direction or development of policy with regard to parents. The *Directions* report began to provide a context for the issue of the role of parents and in a very low priority way has identified it as being important, yet did not provide any recommendations for revisions to existing structures nor policy.

In 1997, Saskatchewan Education published a public discussion paper on a series of 1996 public consultations from which comments focusing on the present structure of public education in the province of Saskatchewan arose. The document, *Involving Parents and Community in Schools*, examines the formal structures that exist within the province and provides recommendations for future developments. The specific issue that the report intended to address was the existing "public structures supporting parent and community involvement. These include district boards of trustees (local boards), local school advisory committees, parent advisory councils, school councils, parent-teacher associations and home and school associations" (Saskatchewan Education, 1997, p. 4). While this report did not examine the specific relationship that exists between parents and teachers within the context of individual classrooms, it does begin to examine the issue of parent involvement as being an integral part of our current public education system.

The Honorable Pat Atkinson, Minister of Education (in 1997) began her formal introduction of this report by stating that "educating Saskatchewan's young

people and providing for their well-being and success are complex and important tasks. Educators play a key role. The success of their efforts depends on the shared commitment and involvement of parents and other members of the community" (Prologue). With this official statement from the highest-ranking governmental official in the Department of Education in the province of Saskatchewan, the tone was set to firmly entrench parent involvement as an essential ingredient in the educational mixture.

In the Regina Public School System, two manuals directing educational policies and procedures provide guidance for educators. The first is *The Education Act* last revised in 1995 and put forth by the provincial government intending to outline the operation of schools within the province. Regina Public School Division No. 4 publishes the second document entitled *Bylaws and Policies*. Its intent is to interpret *The Education Act* within the particular context of the Regina Public School System and to provide local policy and operating procedures for *The Education Acts'* implementation. Both documents make mention of the involvement of parents within the educational context. However, both documents are equally narrow in their definitions.

The Education Act (1995) mandates that

> A teacher shall:
> report regularly, in accordance with policies of the school approved by the board of education or conseil scolaire to the parent or guardian of each pupil with respect to progress and any circumstances or conditions that may be of mutual interest and concern to the teacher and the parent or guardian. (Article 231.2G)

This is the sole mention in the lengthy act regarding parents and their involvement directly with teachers. Other sections, for example, "Parent Involvement Committees" (sections 135 to 140 inclusive) exist within the document; however, they address the establishment, roles, and governance of school based parent groups.

The Regina Public School System's *Bylaws and Policies* manual (1988) echoes the provincial government's statements regarding communication with parents. "Clear communication is vital for an effective school system. The Regina Board of Education is committed to open communication and the involvement of the public, parents, staff and pupils in its decision-making process" (Policy KBH). This policy lays out the official vision, vis a vis parent involvement and communication in Regina Public School Division No. 4. In addition, printed on the front of the "Regina Public Schools Progress Report for Grades Five to Eight" is the statement:

> Parents and guardians are a child's first and most important teachers. Communication is a key to a successful partnership. Progress Reports are one way to provide information to parents and students. ... [Parents] are invited to contact [their] child's teacher at any time to provide or receive information. We look forward to working with you and your child this year to ensure that your child has positive, productive experiences in school. (Form #3212-96)

Both official statements publicly affirm Regina Public Schools' commitment to parent involvement. The Progress Report even uses the term 'partnership.' However, neither formal policy nor procedures exists at this time, recommending specific actions on the part of teachers to develop and cultivate a relationship with parents.

All existing policy, on the provincial as well as the local level, points to a commitment to and a need for parents and teachers to work together to the benefit of children. Repeatedly, the need for cooperation is mentioned. However, as existing

policy prevails, a strong need within the province for some formalized direction for teachers regarding parent involvement is needed. *Neither Directions: The Final Report* nor the "Involving Parents" document nor the Regina Public Schools document nor *The Education Act* mentions specific strategies. The context has been outlined. Within all of these long and comprehensive documents, parent involvement holds very low priority as substantiated by its brief mention without any form of recommendation.

These omissions indicate an area of need regarding policy development if we are to believe current research regarding the benefits of parent involvement. Increased parent involvement has been positively correlated with social, academic, and psychological benefits for children. It, therefore, stands to reason that parent involvement is an area requiring much more time and effort by both teachers and policy makers.

The Benefits of Parent Involvement

Problems Associated with Current Research

Teachers have known instinctually that showing an active interest in a child's education will benefit the child. This belief seems to support the notion of a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, if we are actively involved with our child (of course, inherent in this, is the expectation for success), then our child will succeed. Of late, there has been substantial research in this area in an attempt to quantify popularly held beliefs. The result has been a vast bank of research that generally demonstrates a positive correlation between increased parent involvement and the academic, social, and psychological benefits of students. As well, reams of specific methods for

involving parents abound - communication strategies, ways to get parents into schools, strategies to reach 'hard to reach' parents. Amidst all of this methodology remains the question: what is the benefit and who benefits when parents are actively involved?

Definitive research findings in this area are sometimes difficult to note consistently as the commonality of definition becomes a major obstacle. What defines parent involvement? Can it be measured by the number of communications or is it defined by the number of times a parent volunteers to assist with school activities? As well, what role do socioeconomic status and corresponding developmental stages of students play in determining a correlation? The variables potentially affecting research findings are incredibly numerous. It would seem that if we take these issues into account, it would be difficult if not impossible to locate definitive data and findings.

Overcoming the difficulty in locating accurate and definitive findings is not impossible. A primary consideration is to determine how the researchers have defined parent involvement and then to consider what specific variables have been examined. One solution seems to be to consider correlational research findings that are multivariate correlations using multiple regressional analysis techniques (Charles, 1998). Multivariate correlations "call for explorations of relationships among three or more variables. ... Multiple regression is used to determine the degree of correlation between a continuous criterion variable (Z) and a combination of two or more predictor variables (X and Y)" (p. 267-268). In the instance of parent involvement, parent involvement would be the continuous criterion variable, "a quantitative

variable that can assume a large number of different values. ... In prediction studies using correlations, [it is] the variable that one attempts to predict" (Charles, 1998, p. 363). Associated factors, such as socioeconomic status or developmental stages of students, would function as predictor variables, "the variable used in attempting to predict the criterion variable" (Charles, 1998, p. 369).

> An additional problem with the existing research bank is that when considering the issue of parent involvement, one must consider on what level to examine feelings of involvement and empowerment. On the one hand, parental involvement and empowerment pertain to the individual perceptions of parents. On the other hand, use of these terms in colloquial and policy discussions often convey the impression that perceptions of parental involvement and empowerment are functions of the school and not the school's unique treatment of parents whose children are in the school. In other words, feelings of involvement and empowerment are school-level events rather than individual-level events. (Griffith, 1996, p. 34)

Griffith is attempting to show that parent involvement is an issue to be considered on a more global level than on a case by case basis. He seems to be suggesting that a policy should be established for working effectively with parents; however, the individual must be taken into consideration in the policy formation process.

These issues raise interesting considerations for my research. Should school-level involvement come first? Alternatively, should priority consideration be given to individual involvement?

Student Benefits

"Children whose parents are involved in their schooling have significantly increased their academic achievement and cognitive development" (Becher, 1986, p. 1). Their test scores improve, as do their marks. Their long-term academic achievement increases and they present better attitudes and behaviors (Henderson as cited in Peterson, 1989). As well, these children develop positive attitudes about

themselves and their self-confidence increases (Brown, 1989). Overall, children whose parents are involved in their education tend to do better than those whose parents are uninvolved.

James Griffith (1996) completed a study of about 40 of 122 elementary schools, selected randomly. He was attempting to establish a relationship between parental involvement and student academic performance considering several variables. His results suggested that "parental involvement and empowerment were significant and positive predictors of student CRT scores [criterion-referenced test scores]" (Griffith, 1996, p. 39). Initially, Griffith attempted to establish a relationship between student academic performance and parent involvement by using a correlation coefficient. In this phase of research, Griffith used student academic performance as measured by the state's criterion-referenced test as the criterion variable. The predictor variable was parent involvement. Griffith's correlation coefficient showed a 0.67 degree of positive correlation between CRT scores and parent involvement with a standard error of 0.13. This finding suggests a moderately high correlation between student academic performance and parent involvement with a low degree of error.

> Coefficients of correlation are generally considered to be high if +/- .70 or above, moderate if between +/- .40 and +/- .60, and low if below +/- .20. The lower the correlation, the less accurate are the predictions of one variable from the other. The degree of predictive accuracy for correlations is determined by calculating the standard error of estimate. ... The standard error of estimate indicates the range of likely error inherent in predicting one variable from the other. (Charles, 1998, p. 275)

When parent empowerment is used as the predictor variable with student academic performance as the criterion variable, the correlation coefficient drops slightly to 0.41

with a 0.09 degree of standard error. This finding suggests a low moderate positive correlation between the two variables. However, when parent involvement and empowerment are considered together as predictors and when a partial coefficient correlation is run, the total adjusted correlation coefficient is .572 (There is no mention of standard error). In this instance, Griffith's findings have demonstrated a moderately high degree of positive correlation between parental involvement, empowerment, and student academic performance (Charles, 1998). These findings suggest that students seem to benefit, particularly when parents are involved and feel some degree of control within the educational setting (as noted by the term 'empowerment').

Academic performance is not the only area impacted by parent involvement. William Cottle (1991) cites the work of Henderson (1987). In it, Cottle quotes Henderson's findings "Higher grades and test scores. Long-term academic achievement. Positive attitude and behavior. More successful programs. More effective schools" (Henderson as cited in Cottle, 1991, p. 28). Susan McAllister Swap (1993) underlines the necessity of establishing effectively functioning home-school connections. "Home-school partnership is no longer a luxury. There is an urgent need for schools to find ways to support the success of all [children]" (Swap, 1993, p. 1). Swap explores a multitude of studies that link parental involvement and student achievement. One study she cites, conducted by Sattes (1985) concludes that "parent involvement impacts student achievement when that involvement is meaningful to parents. ... [Gains are reported] when parents are involved as supporters and reinforcers of their child's school learning and when parents are

informed about their child's school progress" (Sattes as cited in Swap, 1993, p. 3). Swap paraphrases the conclusions of Anne Henderson, by saying "parental involvement raises their children's achievement scores. ... [The] barriers, [short-term studies as opposed to long term changes], have been overcome most convincingly when parent involvement programs are integrated with a comprehensive plan of school improvement" (Swap, 1993, p. 9).

Of utmost importance for this Middle Years study is the fact of declining parent involvement as students progress through school. Cottle (1991) cites the works of Weldman & LeMahieu (1985), Stevenson & Baker (1987), Purnell & Gotts (1983), and Thompson (1981) when he discusses how studies have shown that as children progress through school the level of parental involvement decreases. This fact becomes increasingly significant as students enter adolescence. "Other than infancy, there is no other time in life when the individual experiences such rapid and dramatic change" (Eccles & Harold, 1993, p. 568). The authors assert that adolescents are attempting to increase their independence and that one such form of assertion is by distancing themselves from their parents. They continue by saying that, during this time, adolescents are in need of "close relationships with nonfamilial adults to help them sort through independence and identity issues" (p. 568). They state that teachers should attempt to take on this role which is why it is crucial to work closely with parents. For these reasons, the focus on parent involvement in school, in particular during the adolescent years, and the development of positive working relationships between home and school becomes paramount.

Parent Benefits

Students are not the only beneficiaries of increased parent involvement in schools. Parents, too, benefit both directly and indirectly. First, by being more involved in their child's schooling, parents' understanding of the inner workings of schools increases. As well, they begin to become more involved in learning activities at home. In addition, studies have shown that increased involvement benefits parent, teacher, and student communication. With increased communication, there is an increased understanding for all parties. In some instances, increased involvement has provided the impetus for parents to return to school to continue or to finish their own education (Saskatchewan Education, 1997).

Joyce L. Epstein (1986) conducted a study involving 1269 students from 82 first, third, and fifth grade classrooms "assessing parents' attitudes toward the school and teachers, their experiences with different kinds of involvement and communications with schools, and their reactions to the teachers' programs and practices" (p. 278). The results addressed the objectives of the study, but had an interesting corollary result. It became obvious through various parents' comments that they, too, had benefited from and learned something about being involved in their child's education. It seemed to suggest that parent involvement had an educative element.

In instances in which, parents were encouraged to be involved in the schooling of their child, "teacher practices of parent involvement affected parents' awareness of teachers' policies, knowledge of the child's program, and evaluations of teachers' merits" (p. 285). First, parents began to recognize the efforts of teachers.

Parents became more "[aware] that the teacher works hard to interest and excite parents in their children's education" (p. 285). Parents received ideas on how to assist their children and that knowledge increased their confidence in helping. As well, parents were encouraged to help by teachers, which also brought to the forefront for parents, the importance of being involved and increased their confidence.

Next, parents' knowledge about school increased. "Parents feel competent when they know what the school is doing, can help their children through the program, or request changes to improve activities" (p. 288). Epstein's research demonstrated that, when parents are encouraged to be involved, their understanding of the school program increases. Consequently, as their understanding of the program improves, they feel better equipped to assist their child. Finally, they feel better equipped to identify the unique needs of their child and to begin to tailor a program to suit their child's needs.

An interesting benefit for my research from Epstein's study is the effect of grade level on parent confidence.

> Parents of older elementary children more frequently said that they did not have enough training to help their children in reading and math activities at home. They reported that they help their children but that they felt less confident about their help. ... Fewer parents of fifth-grade students said that the teacher worked hard to involve parents or gave them many ideas for home learning activities. (p. 289)

These comments indicate that older students' parents need continual encouragement to be more actively involved as well as need the tools to adequately support the learning needs of their child.

Finally, Epstein's study documents parents' increased ability to accurately evaluate teachers' interpersonal skills and professional merits. These "findings

suggest that, in general, teacher practices of parent involvement maximize cooperation and minimize antagonism between teachers and parents and enhance the teachers' professional standing from the parents' perspective" (p. 290). Parents do benefit greatly from being involved in their child's education. Thus, it is imperative for teachers to encourage and perhaps to demand gently that parents be actively involved in the schooling of their children.

Teacher Benefits

Epstein & Becker (1982) conducted a study examining problems that teachers perceived to be associated with parent involvement and some possible benefits for teachers. Initially, teachers indicated that "there are few rewards, other than internal ones, to encourage a teacher to spend time working toward the potential benefits of parent involvement" (p. 106). However, as the study continued, teachers did indicate that there were benefits for themselves directly. "In spite of some real problems, many teachers described benefits they perceived or expected for their students and for the parents" (p. 106). Teachers spoke of the academic benefits to students and of the increased confidence level of parents in both supporting their children's learning as well as the general functioning of the school. However, teachers did not recognize any other benefits to them directly.

Increased parental involvement provides corollary benefits for teachers even though teachers do not recognize them. First, by being more involved, parents have a better understanding of the workload of teachers and, therefore, parents' satisfaction level with teachers' skills and contributions improves. As well, parent involvement provides benefits professionally. Studies have shown that increased involvement is

usually related to teachers' efforts to promote involvement (Epstein, 1986). This usually results in improved evaluations by principals during supervision cycles. In addition, increased involvement shows direct links to job satisfaction and to reduced requests for school transfers (Saskatchewan Education, 1997).

> By having parents more actively involved, teachers' lives were made easier because parents who were involved tended to have more positive views of teachers. ... School climate became more positive, and parents rated schools as good. Feelings of ownership were created. ... Parents and principals rated teachers higher in overall teaching ability and interpersonal skills if teachers used parent involvement techniques frequently. ... Adult volunteers also saved schools money by performing needed services. (George, Lawrence & Bushnell, 1998, p. 165)

Teachers do benefit even though these benefits are unrecognized by them. Thus, increased parent involvement in children's schooling appears to provide benefits for its three primary stakeholders.

Parents' and Teachers' Perceptions of Involvement

Joyce Epstein has conducted a number of studies comparing parents' perceptions of teachers' practices and teachers' perceptions of parents' involvement. She has developed a dichotomy - "teachers' practices that emphasize the cooperation or separation of schools and families" (Epstein, 1986, p. 278). In her 1986 study, Epstein investigated the relationship of parents' perspectives on their level of involvement in schools. Epstein surveyed 1269 parents, "assessing parents' attitudes toward the schools and teachers, their experiences with different kinds of involvement and communications with the schools, and their reactions to the teachers' programs and practices" (p. 278).

After running correlation coefficients between parent involvement and varying factors of the parents' personal profiles such as educational background and ethnicity, she found

> Parents' education did not explain their experiences with parent involvement unless teacher practices were taken into account. In the classrooms of teachers who were leaders in the use of parent involvement, parents at all educational levels said they were frequently involved in learning activities. ... Teacher leaders conducted more equitable programs, reaching all or most parents as part of their teaching philosophy and instructional strategy. ... [In other teachers' classrooms], their selective use of parent involvement, however, was more often built on negative expectations of a parent's and, possibly, a child's ability to succeed. (Epstein, 1986, p. 290-291)

Joyce Epstein (1991), in examining various models intended to develop partnerships discusses the conclusions of Shepherd Zelden with regard to policy development. Zelden's conclusions support Epstein's conclusions from 1986. "Those teachers who allocated time for collaboration rarely expressed hesitation in working [with parents], were motivated to go beyond policy directives, and concluded that working with parents improved the teachers' effectiveness" (Zelden as cited in Epstein, 1991, p. 348). Both Zelden and Epstein identify the effort that teachers put into cultivating partnerships as being a decisive factor.

> The findings are again reiterated in Eccles' & Harold's work (1993).
>
> Epstein and her colleagues [suggest] that school factors are the primary influence on parent involvement. In fact, the strongest predictors of parent involvement ... are [the teacher's practices] being used (or not used) to encourage parent involvement: When parents feel that schools are doing things to involve them, they themselves are more involved in their children's education. (Eccles & Harold, 1993, p. 576)

Eccles & Harold (1993) outline three ways to improve parent involvement in schools: (a) involve parents in school governance, (b) keep parents better informed, and (c) provide opportunities to support school learning at home.

If one builds upon the idea of establishing "close relationships with non-familial adults ... [working] in concert with the adolescent's parents" (p. 568-569), then the importance of keeping parents informed becomes the first priority and perhaps the cornerstone of the parent involvement issue. William Cottle (1991) cites the work of Greene & Habana-Hafner who "saw improving home-school communication as an essential first step in increasing parental involvement with the school" (Greene & Habana-Hafner as cited in Cottle, 1991, p. 35). Eccles & Harold (1993) underline this idea by stating "it is essential that schools go beyond the more traditional approaches to communication, such as conferences and open houses, to an approach that sets up a personal relationship between particular teachers and each parent" (p. 578). It is this personal relationship in conjunction with a sense of teacher efficacy (with regard to parent involvement) that will make a successful partnership.

Ames, de Stefano & Sheldon (1995) have conducted a longitudinal project in which they examined the relationship of parent involvement and specific teacher practices. In their study, they focused on school to home communications. They have broken school to home communication into three categories: (a) information regarding learning activities, school events, curriculum, (b) information regarding children's individual progress, and (c) information regarding home support. These categories are quite useful when attempting to develop a framework for considering communication and its impact.

Ames et al. use these categories to calculate correlation coefficients between parent involvement and types of school to home communications. Their findings

regarding school to home communication support Epstein's findings (1986) concerning parent involvement. They conclude that "helping teachers develop a sense of efficacy for involving parents may be an important component. ... School to home communications seemed to be more directly related to parents' level of comfort with the school" (p. 24).

These findings (Ames et al.) taken in conjunction with Epstein's findings (school factors are the primary influence on parent involvement) make a strong argument for teacher initiated relationships with parents, done with confidence and openness to maximize parent involvement.

These literature-based research findings indicate the importance for all primary stakeholders (parent, student, and teacher) to be actively involved and participating to maximize the educational benefits for all. The findings of the work of Epstein (1986, 1991), Eccles & Harold (1993), Cottle (1991), and Ames et al. (1995) substantiate the necessity for teachers to examine their own attitudes toward parent involvement and how these attitudes influence their practice. These research findings reveal a need for practical school based investigation into parent teacher partnerships and perceptions of these partnerships. My school-based research seems to address this need.

CHAPTER THREE

FINDING A WAY TO UNDERSTAND AND CHANGE PRACTICE

There is an important chapter still to be written by you, ... on extending and redefining your own practice and, through this means, further developing educational theory. (Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 1993, p. 209)

Action Research Approach as Applied to This Research

"Action research is a very practical way of looking at your own work in order to check whether it is as you would like it to be" (McNiff, 1995, p. 5). McNiff's definition succinctly states the aims of action research. John Elliot adds to this definition; however, his view evolves over a period of time. Initially, Elliot (1978) explains that "action research in schools investigates human actions and social situations which are experienced by teachers as: a) unacceptable in some respects (problematic), b) susceptible to change (contingent), [or] c) requiring a practical response (prescriptive)" (Elliot, 1978, p. 356). His definition is revised (1991) when he describes action research as "the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it" (Elliot as cited in Altrichter et al., 1993, p. 4). In both definitions, Elliot views the action as taking place within a social environment. However, by 1991, he summarizes its main aim as that of improving practice.

Grundy & Kemmis (1981) expand on Elliot's definition by stating that

> there are two essential aims of all action research activity: to improve and to involve. Action research aims at improvement in three areas: 1) the improvement of a practice, 2) the improvement (for professional development) of the understanding of the practice by its practitioners, and 3) the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place. (p. 322)

Each definition whether practical or theoretical helps to develop an understanding of and begins to direct the research process. Each orients the work of action research within a social context, discussing the improvement of the understanding of the practice and the improvement of the practice, itself, as the intent of research.

In my particular context of action research, according to McNiff (1995), I am examining my relationship with parents to see if "it is as [I] would like it to be" (p. 5). Alternatively, according to Elliot, I am investigating the human action of parent teacher partnerships within the social situation of my classroom. My present experience is "susceptible to change" (Elliot, 1978, p. 356) and "[requires] a practical response" (p. 356) because I feel that it is. Following Grundy's & Kemmis' (1981) description, I am trying to improve my practices associated with parent-teacher partnerships. As well, I am attempting to understand this practice both from the point of view of the teacher as well as from that of the parent and of the student. Finally, my aim is to improve the atmosphere in which parent teacher partnerships occur. My primary intent is to examine my current parent teacher partnership practices with an eye to improving them by developing an understanding of the people involved.

As the aforementioned definitions state, action research is a complex process embedded in a social situation. Carr & Kemmis (1986) believe that

> action research, being concerned with the improvement of educational practices, understandings and situations, is necessarily based on a view of truth and action as socially-constructed and historically-embedded. First, it is itself an historical process of transforming practices, understandings and situations—it takes place in and through history. Any action research study ... begins with one pattern of practices and understandings in one situation, and ends with another, in which some practices or elements of them are continuous through the improvement process while others are discontinuous (new elements have been added, old ones have been dropped, and transformations have occurred in still others). (p. 182)

Within this discussion of the historical nature of action research, the cyclical nature of the process is implied. Within a first cycle, "one pattern of practices and understandings" (p. 182) exists. Some of them may continue through the whole process. However, with the improvement process, these practices and understandings may be modified and thus are discontinuous in nature.

My Current Practices

> *Do what you can, with what you have, where you are. (Theodore Roosevelt as cited in Caruana, 1998, p. 18)*

Within the framework of my research, I need to begin with my current parent teacher partnership practices embedding my process of action research within my social context. As van Manen (1990) has pointed out, a researcher begins with an understanding of "the structure of one's own phenomenon" (p. 57). The structure of my own phenomenon is simply an understanding of my current partnership strategies. Altrichter et al. (1993) would support this starting point. "Action research begins with the finding of a starting point for development within one's practice and having the will to invest energy in pursuing it" (p. 7). Therefore, I need to clarify my current practices as my starting point before I can move forward.

I believe that the relationship between student, parent, and teacher is one of the fundamental occupations of my work as an educator. If an effective communication system exists, all stakeholders are happier and the relationship functions much more productively. Parents are more willing to support school activities if they know what is going on. In early September, I meet formally with parents. The intent of this meeting with parents is to establish my goals, method of

instruction, expectations of students, of parents and of me, classroom management methods, content, and methods of evaluation.

Each month, I distribute a Classroom Newsletter outlining events that happen in the classroom and in the school, that may affect my students. It may acknowledge volunteers and any achievements in the classroom; it may update Scholastic book orders or describe upcoming events.

An integral part of my communication system is the use of classroom agendas, a daily calendar in which students record homework, important dates, and other pertinent information. It is a means by which students can help to organize themselves and can begin to use time management strategies. This is the heart of my two-way communication methods. Agendas allow for parents to know and ideally to support the school activities on a daily basis. They communicate everything from unfinished homework to minor behavior problems to detentions to positive occurrences in a day. I ask parents to sign it daily and then I check daily for any notes parents may send to me. The agenda is my primary communication tool.

As well as the use of the classroom agenda, I telephone parents regularly to communicate academic, behavioral, and social concerns or accomplishments. Another communication tool that I use is a monthly report, a computerized progress report, distributed at the end of each month that includes all assignments and scores as well as a tabulation of each student's current standing in each class. It has a tear-off portion that parents sign and students return.

Each of these methods constitutes my current "pattern of practices and understanding" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 182). However, they are very

workmanlike in nature. These communication tools comprise a checklist that can be annotated upon completion. These communication tools are simply that, tools, "something ... used in performing an operation or necessary in the practice of a vocation or profession" (*Webster's*, 1991, p. 1243). The Education Act (1995) mandates that

> A teacher shall:
> report regularly, in accordance with policies of the school approved by the board of education or conseil scolaire to the parent or guardian of each pupil with respect to progress and any circumstances or conditions that may be of mutual interest and concern to the teacher and the parent or guardian. (Article 231.2G)

Therefore, my role requires regular communication with parents regarding their child's progress. As I outlined at the start of Chapter Two, the term, partnership, as used in this research, refers to parents and teachers working together cooperatively and collaboratively, having mutual goals, responsibilities and rights with the intent of fostering positive growth within students. Regular communication does not necessarily foster the partnership with parents that I want and that I feel is so critical to maintaining effective and positive relationships.

During Cycle One of the action research process, parents, students, and teachers examined my current practices and voiced their opinions. From these comments, I began to develop a better understanding of how each stakeholder perceives his or her role and how they feel that they are currently contributing to the educational process this year. By soliciting opinions and attempting to understand roles, I moved my conscious "pattern of practices and understandings" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 182) beyond the workmanlike list as it currently exists. I began to see that while, at first glance, these communication tools did not appear to foster

partnerships, they did, in fact communicate a non-verbal message to parents that I cared and was interested in their child. Therefore, the communication tools became more than tools, they became initial vehicles toward the building of partnerships.

I came to regard Cycle Two as a period of transformation. Parent and student feedback helped to determine which practices were modified and what deficit areas needed to be addressed. Gradually, I refined my practices based on feedback and better developed my understanding of roles within the stakeholder relationship. I began to identify which of my behaviors helped to build relationships and those that inhibited the building of the relationship. Based upon this new understanding, I modified my "pattern of practices and understandings" (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 182). In this way, the process became "socially-constructed and historically-embedded" (p. 182).

Part of the cyclical nature of action research is the fact that action researchers are continuously reflecting on the present and thinking toward the future.

> Action research is an 'art of the possible' which does not aim for a predefined ideal state, but helps us to see the potential which is implicit in a situation, and to put into practice action strategies that correspond more closely than previously to our present values. To this end, its cyclical character is most important. The 'test' of action strategies leads to everyday practical action, to new starting points for reflection and, thus, in some cases to new research cycles. (Altrichter et al., 1993, p. 175)

Cycle Three when it is conducted, therefore, will be a time of consolidation. After the modified and new practices have been added, feedback has been received, and as I begin to understand what is truly meaningful to parents, students, and other teachers, I will consolidate my practices that will be effected during Cycle Three. In this way, by adding, deleting, and modifying, my action research process has become "an

historical process of transforming practices, understandings and situations" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 182). Thus, by the end of Cycle Three, I intend to have developed a better understanding of roles and practices that enhance the partnership relationship and to use this new understanding to improve my practice.

Action Research as an Approach to Improving Social Situations

Action research as an approach originated in about 1944 with Kurt Lewin.

> He used the term to describe a form of research which could marry the experimental approach of social science with programs of social action in response to major social problems of the day. Through action research, Lewin argued, advances in theory and needed social changes might simultaneously be achieved. (Kemmis, 1992, p. 27)

As the approach utilized in my research, action research has had a profound effect upon my own classroom social situation. I examined my relationship with parents to see if "it is as [I] would like it to be" (McNiff, 1993, p. 5), investigating the human action of parent teacher partnerships within the social situation of my classroom. My present experience was "susceptible to change" (Elliot, 1978, p. 356). I attempted to clarify both from the point of view of the teacher as well as from the point of view of parents and students. My aim was to improve the atmosphere in which parent teacher partnerships occur. In any case, my intent was to examine and to improve my current social situation with an eye to improving it by developing an understanding of the people involved.

Site Profile

The research site attendance area is considered Middle Class as defined by *Webster's* (1991), "a fluid heterogeneous socioeconomic grouping composed principally of business and professional people, bureaucrats, ... and skilled workers

sharing common social characteristics and values" (p. 752). It has a strong history of parent involvement and support. Its Parent Support Committee of 15 to 20 regularly attending members has a peripheral membership of about 30. Parents are a visible part of the school regularly volunteering during the day and in the evening to support school activities. Many of the children's parents attended the school as children and have moved into the area as adults. It is not transient and families place a high value on education.

As one walks through the research site community, homes are well cared for and the yards are kept well groomed. Sidewalks are shoveled in the winter and lawns are mowed in the summer. Bungalows line each street with an occasional split level nestled in their midst. Mini-vans and station wagons are parked in the front driveways or on the narrow tree-lined streets.

The school is the centre of the community hosting nightly soccer, softball, and t-ball games. In the evening, the play structures are full of children and the surrounding benches are full of parents, pushing baby strollers. It is an active and bustling community with a strong emphasis on family.

The participating elementary school had a Kindergarten to Grade 8 population of about 340 students with 12 - Grade 1 to 8 classrooms, a full time Kindergarten, plus a half time Kindergarten and a full time Behavioral Adaptations Classroom. This study involved a Gr. 7 and 8 class of 29 students. The male to female ratio was twelve to seventeen.

Data Collection in Action Research

Data collection in action research, a form of qualitative research, uses

> "existing resources ... to put together a procedure or product that will resolve the problem at hand. ... The creative aspect of action research and development lies in the organization, implementation, refinement, and evaluation of the new product or procedure. (Charles, 1998, p. 291)

Within this research, four sources of data were used: a sample group of nine parents, a sample group of eight students, two colleagues, and myself. Each participant was involved in a Focus Group. Some participants were interviewed. The student participants maintained Learning Logs and I kept field notes.

Parents

Parent Focus Group

> As with conventional Focus Groups, a structured Focus Group is a facilitated group discussion in which open-ended questions are asked in a way to trigger discussion amongst a panel of participants. However, more effort is given to reducing the structure of the *content* so that the information is gained from the participants rather than being determined by the questions asked. At the same time, the *process* is more structured than is common, to increase the quality of information and the time-economy of the procedure. (Dick, 1998, p. 1)

Parent volunteers were solicited to make up the Focus Group, through a letter of explanation sent to homes. A letter requesting student participants accompanied this letter. It outlined that participation in this study was voluntary. A balance of fathers and mothers, as well as a representation of familial structures (single vs. two parent homes), ethnicity, language background, and educational background was a prime consideration. This balance will help to ensure that every possible voice is represented in the Focus Group. I received nine parents volunteering. Thus, all parents were accepted as volunteers. The action research approach, with the intention of improving my own practice, dictates that the results do not have to be (nor will

they necessarily be) generalizable (Charles, 1998, Altrichter et. al, 1993, McNiff, 1995).

My intent had been to establish a Focus Group with aforementioned characteristics. In part because of the population of the research school (primarily Caucasian and middle-class) and in part because the group was voluntary, my objective for a balance of participants was not met. Two of the parents who volunteered were stay-at-home moms. One of the two moms had been at home full-time until the year prior to the study when she began to work part time as an accountant, completing the month end books for a company. A third stay- at-home mom offered childcare from her home. Another mother was a Registered Nurse who taught nursing at the SIAST campus. Another worked as a Social Worker specializing in addictions counselling. Two of the mothers worked in the field of education – one as Special Education consultant in another school division, the other as a Special Education Assistant in my school system. The father, married to the Special Education Assistant, worked in the salvage yard for Saskatchewan Government Insurance.

Parent Interview

"Interviews have developed from everyday conversation. They give access to other people's perceptions, including crucially the thoughts, attitudes and opinions that lie behind their behaviour" (Altrichter et al., 1993, p. 101). Altrichter et al. (1993) seem to echo van Manen's (1990) discussion of the conversational interview.

> The interview serves very specific purposes: (1) it may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of the human phenomenon, and (2) the interview may be used as a vehicle to develop a

> conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience. (p. 66)

The intent of my interview was to delve deeper into parents' experiences. I wanted to develop a better understanding of how parents (and students) experienced the partnership relationship.

The interview was structured following my original research questions (refer to page 9). I used an unstructured interview format in which I initiated the conversation by posing my research questions. I chose the unstructured interview format because "[unstructured interviews] give interviewees room to develop their own concerns in answering the questions. ... These interviews ask for perceptions and interpretations of specific events" (Altrichter et al., 1993, p. 108). Then, the discussion was allowed to progress from there. However, as needed, it was refocused by the objectives of this study.

Parent Focus Group Meetings

Each parent in the Focus Group was asked to attend one Focus Group meeting per cycle. The agendas of these meetings varied depending on the cycle. For each Focus Group meeting, I had established my objectives (my research questions) and had a prepared set of general questions to lead each group and initiate discussion. It was not my intent, however, to manipulate the direction of the discussions. Rather, I would begin the meeting with one or two questions and allow the discussion to progress where it would. My only redirection involved ensuring that my original objectives were met and that I received feedback to assist me in answering my specific research questions. The second Focus Group meeting began with a discussion of the data summary (Altrichter et al., 1993), made from the first Focus Group

meeting. My intention was to ensure that I had a clear understanding of parents' comments and intentions (Altrichter et. al, 1993).

Students

> *This experience confirmed my belief that educators can benefit from hearing students' critical perspectives, which might cause them to modify how they approach curriculum, pedagogy, and other school practices. (Nieto, 1996, p. 83)*

Rationale

I decided to include student feedback as another data source within this research. The question of why arises, as the topic of my research specifically addresses parent and teacher partnerships. Fundamental to my philosophy of education is the active involvement of students in the schooling process. Schooling is about children and therefore any decisions regarding schooling directly affect them. Thus their involvement in any decision-making process is vital.

Lorien Belton (1996), a senior class valedictorian at Sheridan High School, Sheridan Wyoming, addresses the issue of student voice in examining what teachers know and do within classrooms. In her article, she addresses student voice within the context of teacher evaluation. She comments that students would welcome the opportunity to participate in formalized teacher evaluations. She believes that if students are chosen with care, they possess the maturity to approach and handle the topic with an appropriate level of seriousness.

> During observations, the student [evaluator] would not only record teaching techniques, but also would try to get a feel for the enthusiasm of the class, the subject matter, the control the teacher has over the class, and the students' respect for the teacher ... Students can pick up details that adult observers don't detect. (p. 68)

Belton's comments raise two important issues. First, her comment that "students can pick up details that adult observers don't detect" is vital as it confirms that students do possess a unique perspective and have observations to offer that no other stakeholder may perceive. As well, her comments confirm the notion that students do possess valid thoughts and look for the opportunity to give their input on issues that do directly concern them.

This need to hear student voice is echoed in an article by Paulette Wasserstein (1995) in which through her informal study, students give their opinion on what is and is not effective for them within their school experiences. "Passive learning is not engaging. For students to sense that their work is important, they need to tinker with real-world problems, and they need opportunities to construct knowledge" (Wasserstein, 1995, p. 43). Wasserstein's comments reaffirm that students would choose to be actively involved in education. To be given the opportunity to participate in something that is authentic and therefore "real-world" seems to be important to them.

When looking specifically at Middle Years students, involving them in this research process addresses their developmental level and is one way to begin to meet some of their unique needs. Middle Years students "[want] to wrest control from those in charge so they can be responsible for themselves" (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996, p. 64). This particular comment is made in the context of transferring ownership of conferences from teachers to students. However, it is equally applicable to my research and to the developmental level of adolescents. "Shared responsibility for the learning environment helps students learn to pull

together in a spirit of mutual support. This shared responsibility increases students' sense of belonging and sense of accomplishment" (George et al., 1998, p. 412).

Sonia Nieto (1996) has also completed research on junior high and senior high school students. She views student voice as one essential element in the process of changing school policies and practices. Nieto (1996) draws on the work of Paulo Freire who believes that "teachers need to become students just as students need to become teachers, in order for education to become reciprocal and empowering for both" (Nieto, 1996, p. 83). These comments echo the work that she cites of Jim Cummins called 'the relations of power.'

> In proposing a shift from coercive to collaborative relations of power, Cummins argues that traditional teacher-centered transmission models can limit the potential for critical thinking on the part of both teachers and students. ... By encouraging collaborative relations of power, schools and teachers can begin to recognize other sources of legitimate knowledge that have been overlooked, negated, or minimized. (Nieto, 1996, p. 80)

Teachers create an engaging learning environment and allow real world problem-solving (Wasserstein, 1995) by allowing students to look at their teacher's teaching practices and to give their input as to what they find is effective in meeting their needs and what is not. As well, adding student voice to the mix provides a unique perspective unparalleled by any other stakeholder.

What is the benefit to me as a teacher-researcher? Jeff Orr (1997), then a doctoral student, studied the role of "classroom environments in shaping students' social responsibility" (p. 248). Within his research, Orr spent time observing, interacting and talking with children. He found that

> children's comments allowed [him and the teacher] to see the way [the children] were making sense of their social context, which greatly influenced

> [his and the teacher's] understanding of community. ... Children's expressions of their points of view also showed they were internalizing both social and pedagogical reasons for community-oriented activities in the classroom. (Orr, 1997, p. 256-7)

By talking with children and soliciting their viewpoints, Orr was able to discover two important pieces of information. First, children have an understanding of what is happening around them. Second, they are able to articulate their understanding.

Both of these discoveries have influential ramifications on my research in justifying the use of student voice. Students represent an important and unique perspective and are anxious to be afforded the opportunity to communicate their perspective. The benefit to my research is invaluable.

Student Focus Group

A letter was sent out soliciting student volunteers to make up the sample group. It indicated that participation in this study was voluntary. A balance of females and males, as well as a representation of familial structures (single vs. two parent homes), ethnicity, language background, and educational background was a prime consideration. I wanted to ensure that all possible student voices were represented. Eight students volunteered to participate (seven girls and one boy). Thus, all students were accepted as volunteers. An action research approach, with the intention of improving my own practice, dictates that the results do not have to be (nor will they necessarily be) generalizable (Charles, 1998, Altrichter et. al, 1993, McNiff, 1995).

It is important to note that the balance that I had wanted for my Focus Group was not achieved, particularly with regards to the male/female ratio. A couple of

factors may have affected this outcome. First, my male students generally were involved with volleyball and basketball during the noon hour when Focus Group meetings were held. My female students were not affected because I coached both the Girls' Volleyball team and the Girls' Basketball team. A second factor may have my male students' general hesitation in discussing their feelings particularly with girls present. I regard this absence of males as a potential area that would need to be addressed in future studies.

Student Interviews

Four of the students from the Focus Group were interviewed during Cycle One. Judgmental sampling was used to select interview participants. "Judgmental sampling ... is used to select certain segments of the population for the study. [I used my] judgment as to which [participants] should be included" (Charles, 1998, p. 146). The intent of the interviews was to obtain data directly related to my research questions. Student interviews were structured in the same way that the parent interviews were. The conversation began around the research questions but was allowed to progress in the direction that it took.

Student Learning Logs

> Using open questions, it is easy to collect pupils' perceptions in the course of classroom work. Pupils' essays, for example, can perform the function of a questionnaire with one open question. ... One way of collecting data regularly on pupils' perceptions is the pupil's diary. Entries in a diary can be answers to open questions. (Altrichter et al., 1993, p. 114 – 115)

All students in the Grade 7 and 8 class maintain a learning log. Each of the student participants was asked to share his learning log in which he documented his experiences and perspectives. A learning log is a student diary in which the student

documents, as prompted by the teacher, his own insights and personal growth. It is also used as a tool for reflection in which the student can reflect upon goal setting and achievement.

Student Focus Group Meetings

Each student in the sample group was asked to attend one Focus Group meeting per cycle. The agendas of these meetings varied depending on the cycle. The structure of the meetings was similar to the parent Focus Group meetings. For each Focus Group meeting, I had established my objectives (refer to page 9 to see my research questions) and had a prepared set of general questions to lead each group and initiate discussion. It was not my intent, however, to manipulate the direction of the discussions. Rather, I would begin the meeting with one or two questions and allow the discussion to progress where it would. My only redirection involved ensuring that my original objectives were met and that I received feedback to assist me in answering my specific research questions. The second Focus Group meeting began with a discussion of the data summary, made from the first Focus Group. My intention was to ensure that I had a clear understanding of students' comments and intentions (Altrichter et. al, 1993).

Colleagues

Colleagues as Critical Friends

The notion of a critical friend in action research has become prevalent. One of their roles is to provide criticism and feedback to the action researcher (and to help with interpretation of data). "Conversations with colleagues play an important part in action research. ... The partners in this conversation should be critical friends: they

should have empathy for the teacher's research situation and relate closely to his or her concerns, but at the same time be able to provide rich and honest feedback" (Altrichter et al., 1993, p. 61). Kember et al. (1997) state that "the role of 'critical friend' or 'facilitator' in action research is perceived as an agent for teacher development, rather than to facilitate the progress of the research" (p. 464). Thus, my intent in selecting colleagues to participate is twofold. First, I want informed constructive criticism on my methods and emerging conclusions from someone who is knowledgeable about teaching Middle Years students. As well, I want to establish a support network that assists my own professional growth. The two colleagues who were selected for this research were Middle Years teachers with a variety of teaching experiences. This variety provided for teachers who have experienced similar teaching situations to my own and who were able to empathize with the research situation.

Collegial Focus Group

A third source of data was colleagues from whom I solicited feedback on parents' and students' comments on partnership. My two colleagues functioned as critical friends, providing me with both an objective viewpoint on the work that I am doing as well as providing feedback and comments on parents' and students' perspectives. In addition, they supported my professional development.

> When you invite [a critical friend] to support you in collecting data about your teaching, good communication is important. The partnership might begin with a preliminary conversation so that you can explain the starting point for the research and some of the initial insights. The next step would be to talk over ideas for the first stages of the research. This not only helps your critical friend to get a clearer picture of your concerns, but also helps you to clarify ideas by talking them through. (Altrichter et al., 1993, p. 181)

I solicited collegial input by way of Focus Group meetings. I tape-recorded these interactions and documented them in my research diary. Initially, the purpose of these interactions was twofold. First, I needed to verify my own perceptions regarding parents' and students' comments. Second, I wanted to discover other successful methods of age-appropriate partnership strategies and practices. During Cycle Two, I asked my critical friends to examine transcripts of parent and student interviews and Focus Group meetings and to comment on the initial conclusions and emerging themes that I had tentatively identified. As well, I asked them to add any additional conclusions. Last, we discussed their successful partnering strategies.

Terri Mayne

Field notes

Karen Hale Hankins (1998) presents a lovely recitation of the use of journalizing in "[giving] context and meaning to [her] understanding of the children [in her class]" (p. 94). "Researchers ... have found that keeping a journal, diary or log can be very helpful for keeping a record of insights gained, for discerning patterns of the work in progress, [and] for reflecting on previous reflections." (van Manen, 1990, p. 73). While conducting my research, I kept field notes in the form of a research diary (Altrichter et al., 1993) in which I documented my experiences and perspectives. This documentation related directly to what I was doing within the context of this study or made connections between research and my prior experience.

In keeping faithful to Altrichter's et al. (1993) notion of a research diary, I included memos.

> Memos are produced when trying to recall and write down experiences that occurred in a specific period of time. ... The memo often provides the only

> possibility of collecting data on your own practical activities without too much investment of time and energy. (p. 20)

Some memos were descriptive sequences "[containing] accounts of activities" (p. 20), in which detail was of the utmost concern. Some were interpretative sequences that later were interpreted to be theoretical notes, methodological notes or planning notes.

In addition to memos, I recorded in-depth reflections that "[focused] ... on a range of experiences over an extended period of time" (p. 25). Their intent was

> to gain access to and reach an understanding of our 'tacit knowledge' (which is the result of our experience but, normally, not directly and consciously at our disposal). The process of writing often helps to unlock this kind of in-depth reflection. (p. 25)

Van Manen (1990) explores this type of reflection. He feels that

> pedagogic reflection is a form of 'self reflectivity.' Self-reflection is the manner by which pedagogy tries to come to terms with self ... and the other. In other words, self-reflection is the way in which pedagogy reflects on itself while serving other. (van Manen, 1990, p. 89)

This kind of reflection became critical to a complete analysis of my own observations as well as my examination of the other data sources.

Tape-Recordings

I used tape-recordings and their transcription (of each interview and each Focus Group meeting) as another data source. "Tape-recordings capture the sounds of a situation. ... A more complete record is made of the sounds than possible in direct observation" (Altrichter et al., 1993, p. 93). From the cassettes, I presented data summaries to each of the Focus Groups for verification and revision, if necessary. This process ensured that I had an accurate record of the Focus Group meetings.

Data Analysis in Action Research

"Action research is a very practical way of looking at [my] own work in order to check whether it is as [I] would like it to be" (McNiff, 1995, p. 5). Within this approach, reflection by myself, by my Focus Group members, and by my critical friends were the central data sources. Thus, a critical examination of these data sources was crucial in making sense of the data and in deriving some meaning from it.

Van Manen (1990) speaks of this process as "[trying] to grasp the essential meaning of something" (p. 77). He describes this process as both easy and difficult. It is easy

> because ... to see the meaning or essence of a phenomenon is something everyone does constantly in everyday life. ... But what is much more difficult is to come to a reflective determination and explication of what a teacher is. This determination and explication of meaning then is the more difficult task. (p. 77)

However, these insights are seldom single-layered or one-dimensional. "Meaning is multi-dimensional and multi-layered. That is why the meaning of pedagogy can never be grasped in a single definition. ... And that is why the human science researcher is engaged in the reflective activity of textual labor" (p. 78).

Some data analysis occurred immediately following each session of data collection. Initially, I made data summaries based upon transcriptions of Focus Group meetings and interviews. At the end of Cycle One, I preliminarily coded some data. I attempted to group like pieces of information together and set aside any data that was not corroborated by another source. Because this coding was only preliminary, I did not discard unique perspectives. I set it aside until the end of Cycle

Two. From the categories that were derived, initial themes began to emerge. These themes were confirmed by my Critical Friends and were taken into Cycle Two.

Cycle Two followed a similar process with data summaries, further coding of data, further surfacing of themes, discussion with Critical Friends and then a final coding and thematic analysis. The final step was articulating my findings and themes in a written form and then developing an action plan to examine future issues.

Data Summaries

During the initial phase of data analysis, I made data summaries based on the transcriptions of tape-recorded conversations and based on the writings of students. "It is helpful to review data immediately after they have been collected ... and write a summary, both to provide easy access to the data later and to get an overview of what they offer concerning the research question" (Altrichter et al., 1993, p. 123). I followed the questions as posed by Altrichter et al. to frame the data summary and to present a consistent review of its contents:

1. What is the context in which the data were collected? Why were they collected? Why in this particular situation? Why using this method of collection?
2. What are the most important facts in the data? Is anything surprising?
3. About which research issues are the data most informative?
4. Do the data give rise to any new questions, points of view, suggestions, and ideas?
5. Do the data suggest what should be done next, in terms of further data collection, analysis, or action? (p. 123)

The authors suggest that data summaries should be kept to two or less pages in order to provide the maximum amount of information in a quick and efficient manner. Thus, I developed a form that was used after transcribing tape-recorded interviews,

Focus Group meetings, and Critical Friends' meetings. This form was used in examining the interviews and the Focus Group meetings.

Coding Data

This phase of the data analysis process involved a first attempt at finding like ideas and organizing them into categories. "One important method of getting 'concept leverage' on data is organizing them into categories. ... Categories (features) need to be chosen which are relevant to the research question and at the same time partially express the contents of the data" (Altrichter et al., 1993, p. 123). The authors suggest that two methods for deriving categories may be used, the inductive method, in which categories are derived based on the data, and deductive method, in which the researcher uses her experience to derive logical categories that would be relevant. The authors further suggest that using one in isolation from the other eliminates some of the richness of data that can be achieved by using both. "... It is probably most useful to use a mixture of both methods, capitalizing on what you already know but remaining open to the surprises the data can contain" (p. 124).

My data coding was a combination of the two methods. First, I considered what categories would make sense with regard to partnerships based upon my general impression of the data collected (inductive method). From this impression, I developed general categories. Next, I did an in-depth reading of the data (during both cycles) and developed categories (deductive method). During Cycle One, the categories were general and tentative. After Cycle Two, they became specific and were finalized.

Part of the process became a confirmation of categories and a confirmation of the consistency of data between the various data sources.

> Comparison between [data sources] provides part of the check on their adequacy. This is commonly called triangulation. ... A comparison of the two or more sources of data then enables you to focus on agreements and disagreements. Information which is unique, provided by only one person, can then often be discarded. (Dick, 1997, p. 5)

This process of examination, confirmation, re-examination, and then finalization of categories helped to ensure the accuracy of the data's coding.

Thematic Analysis

Theme can be defined as "a specific and distinctive quality, characteristic, or concern" (*Webster's*, 1991, p. 1222). During this phase of the data analysis process, my intent was to identify "specific and distinctive [qualities]," "specific and distinctive [characteristics]," and "specific and distinctive [concerns]"of parent teacher partnerships. Van Manen (1990) speaks of thematic analysis as "the process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work" (p. 78). This process builds upon Altrichter's et al. (1993) idea of coding and categories. The categories from Cycle One were built upon and expanded into van Manen's notion of theme at the end of Cycle Two.

I used three strategies to begin to isolate these thematic statements. First, I used the holistic reading approach, which "[attends] to the text as a whole and [asks] 'What sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole?'" (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). This strategy was used concurrently with the selective reading approach in which "[I] ... read a text several

times and [asked], 'What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?'" (p. 93).

From these strategies, I isolated ideas that began to describe or helped to provide understanding to the experience of the partnership relationship. "The point is that no conceptual formulation or single statement can possibly capture the full mystery of this experience. So a ... theme is much less a singular statement ...than a fuller description of the structure of a lived experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 92).

Linguistic Transformations

This process finalized this research process, but in no way ended my professional growth process, finishing with two final phases. The first phase involved articulating in writing my new understanding of the relationship experience based upon my essential themes (van Manen, 1990). In the second phase, I built an action plan, which took my new understanding and attempted to build it into my practice (Altrichter et al., 1993). When I continue this project and conduct a third cycle, the synthesis of the understanding and practice will occur.

In Chapter Four, I synthesize each data source and attempted to surface initial conclusions that could be derived from the specific data. As well, I attempt to make initial conclusions and began to provide some preliminary answers to my research questions. Chapter Four attempts to document my professional journey from January 1999 to June 1999, painting a picture of the Focus Group meetings, the interviews and the journal transcriptions. It attempts to superimpose this journey and document it as an action research journey, identifying stages of the voyage. It represents six months as an educator.

Chapter Five identifies the themes that have emerged from the process and identifies my evolution of thought and the transformation of my understandings. It engages in pedagogical reflection (van Manen, 1982, 1990). Chapter Six examines my evolution of practice and re-contextualizes it within the framework of a Community School. Thus, my action research study has become "an historical process of transforming practices, understandings and situations—it takes place in and through history" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 182).

CHAPTER FOUR

THE STORY OF AN EVOLVING PARTNERSHIP

I thank you for your voices, thank you for your voices, thank you,
Your most sweet voices. (Shakespeare as cited in Roger & McWilliams, 1994, p. 2)

My action research journey includes two cycles, each incorporating four phases. The first phase is the 'Developing Understanding' phase. The second phase is the 'Initiating Action' phase. The third phase is the 'Reflecting on Action' phase. The last phase of each cycle is the 'Planning for the Next Cycle' phase. While the process appears to be linear, it is, in fact, not. The reflection phase can be found woven throughout the other three. The planning phase can also be identified within each phase.

The data collection process attempted to give voice to each partner within the three-way educational environment. Data were collected from parents, students, and teachers (both from the researcher and from colleagues). It is important to note that in presenting the comments and perceptions of participants, I chose to use verbatim quotations. I feel that by including the direct quotations with the exact speech patterns, a more accurate presentation of the participant's thoughts is provided.

Cycle One

The data collection for Cycle One included the following data sources: a Parent Focus Group Meeting, Parent Interviews, a Student Focus Group Meeting, Student Interviews, a Collegial Focus Group Meeting, Parent and Student Evaluation Forms, and Student Learning Logs. However, Cycle One is composed of four stages. The first stage is the 'Developing Understanding' phase, within which I discovered

what participants thought. The second stage was the 'Initiating Action' phase. Based upon the thoughts of the participants, I implemented Demonstration of Learning Conferences. In the third phase, my participants and I reflected upon my action ('Reflecting on Action' phase). In the final phase of Cycle One, I did some preliminary planning for Cycle Two.

Developing Understanding

I had worked with the study site's class of students and parents for four months when the study officially began. However, I had worked with some families of students in my room for at least three years and had known many of them for about eleven years. I felt that to develop an adequate base for initiating change within my classroom, I would go outside of my classroom to solicit opinions, impressions, and perceptions.

Parent Interview

This participant does not have a child in my classroom but is extremely active in the school, both as a volunteer and as one of the paid lunchroom supervisors. She is very familiar with me as a teacher, having worked with me within the Parent Support Committee in her capacity of Secretary. Over the last two years, we have worked on several school-based projects together and she has come to know me very well. Initially, when approached about participating in my study, the participant was somewhat hesitant. When assured that we would meet one-on-one, she felt confident about taking part. The interview took place from 10:45 to 11:45 a.m., just prior to her lunchroom supervision.

The participant approached the interview situation with some trepidation over being tape-recorded. We considered putting the tape-recorder away and doing a running record of the interview to encourage her to relax. However, as the interview progressed, she relaxed and spoke with increasing confidence.

The participant identified many important aspects of the parent teacher partnership relationship. She began by discussing the importance of recognizing parents as individuals, of identifying parent's strengths, and of incorporating them into a classroom program. Partnership means

> ... positive involvement, wherever it's required really, whether it be in the classroom, financially, whatever is required. ... [It means] working directly with the teacher rather than just a group of parents doing their thing. ... [It also means] maybe playing on different parent strengths and stuff, bringing those different things because people have different talents, computer skills [for example] maybe that teachers don't have that sort of thing.

She expressed the need for mutual respect and its role in developing the child's self-esteem.

> [Respect] is a two-way thing there. If the parent doesn't have any respect for the teacher and is voicing that around the kid, it's terrible. ... Respect is a big deal! And parents need to respect that. I mean, you went to university for how many years? So, you're trained to [teach]. I'm not!

The participant underlined the importance of the shared responsibility notion of education. "I think that [education] is not just the teacher's responsibility. Really, it's the parent's responsibility too. ...You know that we are all hopefully going for the same goal – this productive well educated kid." The participant felt that teachers must create a climate that encourages working together. She suggested an open door policy, a structured volunteer program, and deliberately developing the feeling that teachers are open and approachable. She felt that this would encourage a feeling of

mutuality of purpose. "An open door. I don't want to feel that if I come into my kid's classroom, that I'm a bother."

As well, the participant expressed the need for constant communication. She felt agendas were one of the primary methods, but that telephone calls were also effective. "Agendas are a wonderful thing. ... Constant communication, that's really, agendas. I think agendas are a good thing for that. If there's a problem, don't let it wait. Deal with it in September if takes having the parent in." She said that she wanted to always be kept abreast of her child's progress, behavior, problems, and generally, what was going on. Lastly, she suggested that partnership manifests itself in different ways depending on the parent.

As the interview concluded the participant made two comments that both surprised and pleased me. She suggested that she would even staple booklets for the teacher if it meant that the teacher would have more time with her child. "If my stapling three hundred pages together gives you more time with my kid's classroom, go for it!" In addition, she stated that teachers must recognize students as individuals rather than as numbers. "Parents like to see that their student, you see them all, you know, not as a number."

Initiating Action

Within this phase, I conducted a Parent and a Student Focus Group meeting and two student interviews. At this time, the non-linear attribute of action research became evident. To be linear, I would have needed to progress through the stages in the sequential order. The first phase is 'the developing understanding' phase. The second phase is the 'initiating action' phase. The third phase is the 'reflecting on

action' phase. The last phase of each cycle was the 'planning for the next cycle' phase. My original plan for the Focus Group meeting was to continue to develop an understanding of parents' thoughts and to begin to have participants comment on changes in my practice based upon my increasing awareness of stakeholders' perceptions. Parents, however, began to reflect on the Demonstration of Learning Conferences and their success.

Because of my deeper understanding of the Middle Years students' need to exert control over themselves, my primary shift in practice had been the implementation of Demonstration of Learning Conferences prior to the Parent Focus Group meeting. The new conference format represented a shift in practice from the previous three way conferences (parent, student, and teacher) to a format in which students communicate their individual progress to their parents without teachers being directly involved (Hackman, Kenworthy, & Nibbling, 1998). The Demonstration of Learning Conference is a conference format in which students communicate their individual progress to their parents. They demonstrate what they have learned by leading their parents through a series of teacher-prepared activities. Parents and students are provided with booklets to guide their exploration. Students become the conference facilitators. Teachers are not directly involved, rather they circulate amongst the conference participants (up to five families conferencing concurrently in the classroom), providing individual support, assistance and clarification where needed. Within this model, students begin to accept responsibility for their academic progress (Hackman et al., 1998).

Parent Focus Group Meeting

My Parent Focus Group met one evening at 7:00 p.m. at my home for approximately one and a half hours. My home, a non-threatening setting, was chosen to encourage free and informal open dialogue concerning my school-based practices and procedures. Six of the nine Focus Group members were able to attend, representing four female and two male students - five women and one male representing one grade eight student and five grade seven students. Two of the parents were married and one parent represented twin daughters.

The group was eager to contribute and readily tackled each question or issue presented. One Focus Group member seemed to dominate the process, while two others made minimal contributions. The importance of building strong interpersonal relationships was a recurring discussion theme. Establishing comfort zones amongst partners, protecting self-esteem, accepting responsibility, and creating and maintaining an open and caring human relations climate were declared as paramount to the development of a good parent teacher partnership. They also identified the structural attribute of two-way communication as being crucial. Parents discussed these attributes as ideals as well as in terms of their observations and conclusions concerning our home and school relationship.

We began by discussing how to identify a partnership relationship. First, parents felt that mutual responsibility and accountability were vital to developing a good relationship. One parent stated that mutual responsibility and accountability help to distinguish a partnership from parent involvement. She stated that "[she thinks] it means responsibility. If you're a partner, you share responsibility along

with the teacher in sharing that your child meets the goals that were set out." A father added that both partners "[assume] responsibility and [say] at that point that you are accountable for it too." Another mother re-iterated this message by stating that "[she thinks] it's a cooperative effort."

Next, parents felt that a proper climate for establishing this partnership is absolutely necessary. One parent stated that the word partnership means that "you can be comfortable. You can be comfortable coming and going whenever." Another parent added that this comfort has to be present whether the nature of the contact is information sharing or problem-solving. "And you've made it really easy. ... If I had to call about big things, I would feel the comfort level."

Parents stated that they observed this climate of comfort extend beyond themselves personally and to their children both in the classroom and beyond. One parent shared that when attending basketball games both she and her husband noted that "to basketball and watching you interact with the team. They were terrible at first. ... And you encouraged them, win or lose, and were very positive with them." Another added, "I saw how the comfort level changed. I saw the one year where my child refused to go to camp and the next year she was begging to go. That's just amazing and you [Terri] did that!" It seemed obvious from these comments that the way that their children interact with me, as the teacher, and the way that their children's self-esteem is cared for has a very deep impact on them, as parents and on the way that they view me.

Parents felt that when a teacher could show parents that she truly knew their children, parents felt more trust and therefore a deeper relationship with that individual. One parent shared

> You really seem to know your students. You really seem to know one of our daughters quite well. She was in the change room [after a basketball game] and just knowing that she is a procrastinator about time. ... But you [Terri] seemed to realize this. When my husband saw that you just know that this kid, she's going to be the last one to get her clothes on and she's going to be the last one out of the classroom. ... It confirms that you know, that you do know our kids."

Another parent re-iterated this point. "And that's an important thing. Knowing that you know our children and what their little quirks are and accept them. But you've taken the effort to get to know them. Because, it does take an effort to get to know children."

As well, the caring by teachers for a child's self-esteem was a major issue for parents. They felt that, if their children were happy and comfortable at school, it was an indication of the positive attention students were receiving from their teacher and therefore put the parent at ease. One parent stated "A lot of other teachers have just focused on [the negatives]. ... [My daughter] does have good qualities and you have reinforced them." Another parent added "Just the personal encouragement you give the kids. Last concession stand, there was never a bad thing that was said. It was always 'You guys are doing great! You're doing this. You're doing that.' And if you're saying it there, it's going to run across into the classroom." Parents indicated that "You [Terri] always care for the individual." They also shared that by teaching life skills to students, I cared for their self-esteem. "You teach the kids to be assertive enough to ask for help and to be independent when they don't need help." The

overriding message from parents was that they wanted their child to be viewed as special and cared for in a kind way.

The link between a child's self-esteem and the perception the parent has about partnering with teachers became evident. When a child has positive school experiences and his self-esteem is consciously cared for, he communicates that to parents and a parent's confidence is increased. When a parent's confidence in the school is increased, they feel more willing to work with school personnel and in the process may develop partnerships with school personnel (Epstein, 1986, Epstein & Becker, 1982, Ames, Khoju, & Watkins, 1993). Ames, de Stefano, & Sheldon (1995) support this assertion. "Parents' overall evaluation of the teacher ... was higher when they received frequent and effective communications" (p. iii). These communications may be teacher initiated, but they also may be student communicated. Whatever the vehicle, the end result is the same – parents feel more confident about their child's teacher and are more willing to partner.

Parents identified regular communication as a crux point of a relationship. However, they stated that the communication must have a possibility of an interactive element. They felt that a teacher's one-way sharing of information was not enough. Parents wanted the opportunity for dialogue and two-way interaction with the development of a mutual plan when necessary. "I think communication, too, is part of a partnership. As a parent I want to be able to call the school."

One of the children, of the Parent Focus Group members, had been involved in an incident involving another student in which very crude language was flung back and forth between the students. I clarified the situation, having each student share his

or her story and then discussed possible appropriate consequences. Together, the students and I decided that they should write a "Thinking Plan" that outlines what happened, what the problem was with what happened, what should have happened, and what would happen the next time, indicating future consequences. Students took home their "Thinking Plans" signed by me [the teacher], the principal (to indicate his awareness of the situation), and the students. Each was expected to discuss the plan with her parents and have her parents sign it, adding any comments of their own. This process is typical of initial infractions such as this one. The mother of one of the children who was involved commented on the process. "I was glad that I had the option to respond to this letter. Whereas, I hadn't always felt that with some other teachers. Once it was discussed in class, then, it was said and done and no more was to be said about it. So I felt comfortable responding to you."

Parents were able to identify several ways that I had implemented on going communication systems. "Communication, ... the implementation of the journals. ... I was impressed when these journals came out." Parents identified the Learning Logs as an excellent opportunity for allowing two-way communication. "Phone calls are great too! ... Another teacher had another idea 'I caught you doing something good!' You've done that Terri, I know you have in a different format."

In this next section, the non-linear nature of action research becomes evident when parents reflect on the Demonstration of Learning Conferences that were newly introduced this term. Initially their responses were in contradiction to the responses found on the evaluation sheets. "Personally, I thought the Demonstration of Learning [Conferences] didn't work. It was like sitting at the table doing homework or

something." However, as the conversation unfolded among the Focus Group members, the parents were able to reflect upon the process and identify three possible reasons for their perceived difficulties with the new format.

First, parents said "I think, we as parents, didn't know what to expect." However, they stated that as the process unfolded, their understanding and comfort level increased. "Part way through, it started to fit together." This indicates the newness of the process and the associated discomfort associated with change. This sentiment is confirmed by one parent's comments. "I would understand how to do it again."

The rationale behind the move to Demonstration of Learning Conferences was to change the locus of control to students. Parents noted that a possible cause for their discomfort was their lack of control. "I don't know if it's the kids who didn't know what was going on. Or us, as parents, weren't in control of the situation, didn't have any real input at that point and us saying what's supposed to be going on."

Finally, parents noted that because of our regular communication that perhaps this type of process was redundant. "You [Terri] almost worked your way out of needing [Demonstration of Learning Conferences] by sending home the Learning Logs every week. You send so much stuff home that you don't need to have them."

Student Focus Group Meeting

Over the course of a noon hour, I met with eight students – four grade seven students and four grade eight students. Of this group, seven girls and one boy attended. The students approached the Focus Group meeting with excitement and enthusiasm, openly expressing their pleasure in being able to participate. However,

initially, three of the students were shy about contributing and needed to be coaxed in order to express opinions. In the end, all students appeared free and open as they expressed their opinions and voiced ideas that, in some instances, were critical of my teaching practices. This openness seemed to indicate a freedom from restriction and a lack of feeling of coercion on my part.

Students recounted some surprising opinions. Firstly, they acknowledged their appreciation of Month End reports and the feeling of control that they had from their receipt. They indicated that Month Ends were one means of communication and re-iterated the parental opinion on the need for regular communication. "I really like Month Ends 'cause I always like to know how I'm doing and have a chance to get better before it really counts." However, they added that all members of the educational triangle needed to be involved in the process. They communicated their fear of being left out and not knowing what parents and teachers were saying to each other. This comment is very typical of Middle Years students who need to feel in control of themselves and not feel manipulated by adults (George et al., 1998).

> Actually I like parent teacher student [conferences] a lot better than I like parent teacher [conferences] because you're there. 'Cause you sit out in the hall, [and think] 'What's she doing?' 'What's she saying to them?' And when you're in there and [the teacher says] something, [we can respond] 'Well, no, no, no! I think this or it's here or it's like that or something.' You can always be in there and you know what's happening at the time.

Students indicated that, as long as they played a part in the interaction, they felt little discomfort with parents and teachers developing a relationship. In fact, they indicated that they were in favor of it.

Students indicated an appreciation of Learning Logs and agendas as learning tools for themselves as well as communicative tools for parents and teachers.

Students expressed a mixed reaction when discussing conferences. They indicated an extreme dislike of parent teacher interviews, commenting that they were afraid of what was being said behind closed doors.

> If you're outside the class you can't, say, really defend yourself. And when the parents finally come back out, you can't show them that you really did that assignment. In my case, last year, they were always angry at me when they came back out. They really wouldn't want to listen to me or my arguments about what was actually happening.

They indicated a preference for parent-teacher-student conferences, as they felt involved in the discussions. When discussing Demonstration of Learning conferences, students indicated some initial confusion over instructions. For example, they felt that the booklets provided at the conferences were too long.

Students identified self-esteem related issues as being of concern to them. First, students felt that I took the time to get to know them as individuals. "Another thing is when you talk to us not in a classroom setting because people are really different and you see that." "I think it has to be a combination of informal but also structured. If it's informal, you still get to see the other side of the person. You're a lot more comfortable and you're a lot more relaxed in the classroom for when you're working and stuff." Next, they felt that our classroom was a low-risk classroom. "It's a risk-taking environment where we don't have to feel that anyone can make fun of us." "You'll reprimand the people who are being malicious."

Finally, they expressed an appreciation for the way in which instructional strategies and tools were used to address all learning styles. "I think it's good that you use like kinetic approach because lots of people are like visual learners. ... It means like learning by doing." "It totally depends on someone's style. Everyone has

their own style. ... But I think it's really good that we use a lot of different instructional strategies. We do alg-tiles – that's kinetic. Look at the charts around here. That's visual where you would see it. ... There are so much varieties in how you teach. There are so much different kinds that it's good for everyone."

These comments identified a conscious attempt on my part to care for students' self-esteem. While I view this act, as being crucial to any social interaction, it has corollary benefits for partnerships. Ames et al. (1993) states that

> parents may be more likely to become involved when they feel comfortable with their child's school and have confidence in their child's teacher. Additionally, parents may be more likely to invest in their child's learning when they perceive their child as willing to learn. (p. 2)

In the Focus Group comments, students have expressed their willingness to learn. Following the aforementioned authors argument, parents will have increased confidence in me, as the teacher and will be more likely "to invest in their child's learning" by becoming involved and by partnering with me.

Student Focus Group Interviews

Participant One

I interviewed Participant One, a grade eight student for about thirty minutes one night after school. When approached, Participant One willingly entered into the interview situation but needed some coaxing and probing in order to adequately answer questions. Answers were brief, often only one or two words.

Participant One re-iterated the fact that she appreciated my use of the agenda as it helped her to organize herself and provided an opportunity for her mom to see what was going on at school, if her mom chose to look at it. "[I think that some of the ways you partner with parents is that you] send home notes, agenda. I get more done

when my mom reads my agenda because she says 'Did you do this?' And I say 'No!'" As well, Participant One felt that I ensured that sufficient work, notes, and information were sent home to keep parents adequately informed as to the events at school. "You send home stuff. ... You talk to parents yourself."

Participant One indicated that I have recognized her mom's philosophy towards education and the parent teacher relationship and have adjusted my way of interacting with her to suit this philosophy. "Mom thinks that I should take care of what's happening at school and tell her. She thinks that's my job. You do that."

Participant One indicated that, for her, it was important to get to know the teacher on a more informal level. She felt that field trips were one way to provide this opportunity. "I remember the fun we had. We had fun with you. ... I've seen your house. We read to Juliana [Terri Mayne's daughter] in your backyard." Participant One indicated that this was absolutely necessary for her to develop an effective relationship with her teacher and that her parents would respond to the kind of relationship that she had developed. "The way that I feel about you affects my [parents]. I talk to them all of the time. I tell them what happens at school and stuff. They know you." She specifically identified the Landslide Coulee field trip as being an exceptionally positive experience and opportunity to get to know me on a more informal level. As well, she spoke highly of the Cypress Hills Outdoor Environmental Education Experience in June of 1998 as being another positive opportunity to interact with me on an informal level. "Landslide Coulee was fun. ... Cypress Hills built trust because you did a good job."

Participant Two

Participant Two was interviewed over a forty-five to sixty minute time span after school. Participant Two was eager to approach the interview situation. During the time we spent together, he spoke openly and freely and seemed genuinely pleased to be interacting with me in this manner.

Participant Two spoke highly of my efforts to partner with families. He felt that I made the effort that many teachers do not bother to make.

> You certainly do [a good job of partnering with parents.] I know from extensive experience! You do a stand up job compared to my past teachers. ... My other teachers would just not pay attention, but you do. ... To the parents ... you don't just like exclude them. You keep them informed on how their kid is doing.

He indicated that I have established a system for ensuring constant communication. He noted both positive and negative telephone calls. "You are also kind because you let me tell my parents. ... I think that hearing the 'bad news' from me helps build their trust in me." As well, he felt that I regularly sent work home to be seen by and discussed with parents. Lastly, he indicated that I forwarded many notes home informing parents of our classroom activities.

When asked to characterize our relationship, Participant Two felt that trust and respect were significant.

> I have had teachers before that I had little to no respect for. The main reason for most of these was that I didn't know them on a personal or informal basis. I just thought of them as 'the annoying person that is always harping on me.' You really put in the effort to try and build more than that.

As with the Focus Groups, the student interviews have assisted in demonstrating the connection between students' self-esteem and parents' confidence. Participant Two makes an indirect connection. He identifies my conscious effort to

building a trust atmosphere in an attempt to bolster students' self-esteem. "You really put in the effort to try and [trust]." Participant One makes the direct connection. "The way that I feel about you affects my [parents]."

Reflecting on Action

My primary 'action' in Cycle One was the implementation of Demonstration of Learning Conferences. This new model represented a shift in the way in which a student's academic progress is reported to parents. At the end of the conferences, I asked all parents to spend a few minutes commenting on their thoughts regarding the new conference format. As well, I asked all students to reflect on the conferences and complete a conference evaluation. While I viewed the Demonstration of Learning Conferences as being the primary action in Cycle One, I felt that perhaps there might be subtle changes in my practice as a result of a heightened awareness because of my research. Therefore, I asked all students to reflect back on Term II (as compared with Term I) and comment on what they liked and what they thought needed improvement and finally what they wished for (in terms of school). Finally, I engaged in reflection with my Critical Friends.

Demonstration of Learning Conference Evaluations

For the Term II conferences, this year, Demonstration of Learning Conferences were my choice for communicating progress to parents. This conference format represented a conscious shift in practice that had been partially effected because of this action research project. This shift represented the 'initiating action' phase of Cycle One. The rationale behind Demonstration of Learning Conferences is

the belief that students know what their strengths and weaknesses are and are able to communicate them to their parents.

After speaking with my Parent Interview participant and because of the initial discussions that I had with both parents and students, I felt that my classroom community would be open to such a shift in conference format. I spent about six weeks prior to the conference dates researching, drafting, revising and finalizing booklets for both parents and students to guide them through the conference - one booklet for parents and one for students. Twenty-five of twenty-seven parent/student combinations attended these conferences. They spent between forty-five and seventy minutes actively engaged in the activities outlined in the student booklet. In addition, families could choose to formally include me during a portion of the conference. Only two families made such a request. However, I did make contact with each family group at least twice during their conference time. At the conclusion of the conferences, both parents and students were asked to evaluate the process as a means of improving the quality of the conferences during the next reporting period and as a means of ensuring that the needs of both parents and students were met during the process.

Parent Evaluations

Twenty-five parents attended the Demonstration of Learning Conferences, representing twenty-three students. Of the parents who attended, twelve or about 50% returned the evaluation sheet attached to the Parent Booklet. The conference evaluation form represented one source of data collection on the planned event during Cycle One.

The Demonstration of Learning conference evaluation sheet contained the following four questions:

1. What aspects of Demonstration of Learning Conferences did you like?
2. What aspects of Demonstration of Learning Conferences did you not enjoy? How could these aspects be improved upon?
3. How could the conference format be modified to better suit your needs?
4. Do you have any other comments to share?

Parents were invited to use the space provided on the evaluation sheet as well as to use the reverse side if additional space was required.

Parents resoundingly responded that the Demonstration of Learning Conference allowed for two positive occurrences. First, it allowed for parents and students to communicate individually without interruptions. Second, parents indicated that they had a much better understanding of the classroom program as well as the evaluation procedures used. Parents also commented on the climate within the Demonstration of Learning Conference. "The student is responsible for the session and their work. It makes it less adversarial ... less pressure perhaps. Good idea!" Yet, while they enjoyed the time that they spent during the allotted conference time, it was felt to be a rather lengthy commitment. During the Parent Focus Group, parents re-iterated this sentiment suggesting that this type of a time commitment during the day, during business hours was difficult to accommodate. As well, it was difficult to move from work, change gears to their child's school and progress and then return to work, changing gears yet again.

Another parent suggested that perhaps this format of conference could begin at home prior to the conference date with a discussion booklet that would open communication between parents and their children. This discussion would be followed up by the Demonstration of Learning Conference at school and reviewed with a follow-up discussion at home after the conference. Most parents indicated that they loved the idea. "This is a great idea for this age group in particular, as the communication between home and school may be decreasing a bit. This is a good way to see everything!" "Excellent idea!" Parents also indicated that more conferences utilizing this format would increase their comfort level as well as their skill in participating in them. "I would need more conferences like this so I could better tell how it works. It seems to be a good way to do conferences." Parents further indicated that they feel that incorporation of a brief conference time during the Demonstration of Learning Conference was important. "Demonstration of Learning Conferences are an excellent way/concept for providing a structured method of communication between students and their parents. However, I do feel that the teacher parent student concept is also very important."

As well, parents commented on the climate and caring that I show their children with regard to conferences as well as in all areas of their child's schooling. "Thank you for all your work and commitment to our kids. [My son] is enjoying this year. You go 'above and beyond' the call of duty. Thank you so much!" Ultimately, parents recognized that the Demonstration of Learning Conference model shifts student learning responsibilities from teachers to the learners.

Student Evaluations

Students commented on many aspects of the Demonstration of Learning Conferences, identifying several of the previously noted items (from both the Student Focus Group, the Student Interviews, and Parent Focus Group). Students liked being directly involved in and controlling the process. They noted that they liked working individually with their parents. Students' comments on the evaluation sheets regarding Demonstration of Learning Conferences echoed their parents' comments on the evaluation sheets. Students remarked repeatedly that they liked being able to show their parents exactly how they were doing and what was going on at school. "The aspects of the conference that I did like were being able to show what I could do and the things that were going on in different subject areas." "... We got to actually do and show our parents how we do all of our subjects and they get to see how we do them. And we get a longer time to explain to them what we are doing." "The part I liked ... was that it gave me a chance to show my parents not just the answers I got, but how I arrived at them." "Well, I think the part I liked best was just talking to my mom about it and communicating with her."

On the conference evaluation forms, students' comments echoed the comments of the Student Focus Group participants. They clearly stated that tension was reduced by the format. "I enjoyed the fact that I was the one showing my parents what I could do, instead of you showing them." This statement implies that students are concerned about the communication that goes on between parents and teachers in isolation from students. It was re-iterated by others. "I also liked the fact that if you [Mrs. Mayne] had something to say, I could hear what you said." The

format also seemed to reduce tension in the students. "I liked it that there were other people in the classroom so it wasn't as tense." The Demonstration of Learning Conference format also allowed students to have a strong voice in the evaluation reporting process. "I liked the fact I had a say instead of just you and my mom talking, not giving me a say." Without verbalizing it, the students recognized that they were responsible for their own learning and yet were accountable to their parents for their learning.

Student Learning Logs

Learning Logs are a regular part of the assessment and evaluation process in my class. Students reflect on a weekly basis and set goals, then reflect upon their personal progress. As well, from time to time, I ask students to reflect or to discuss a particular idea. For example, at the end of a unit, I may ask students for feedback in regard to how it unraveled. At the end of February 1998, just prior to the distribution of Progress Reports, all of the students in my class were asked to respond to a series of open-ended questions and to reflect upon the positive areas and the areas for improvement in our classroom and within my teaching.

The purpose of the inclusion of Learning Logs as a data source is two fold. The first reason is that students are central to the educational process. Therefore, their perspective is critical to have a complete understanding. "Educators can benefit from hearing students' critical perspectives, which might cause them to modify how they approach curriculum, pedagogy, and other school practices" (Nieto, 1996, p. 83). The second purpose is that it is important to be 'in tune' with students' perceptions

about school because they serve as a direct link to the home and to their parents. Ames et al. (1993) state that

> parents may be more likely to become involved when they feel comfortable with their child's school and have confidence in their child's teacher. Additionally, parents may be more likely to invest in their child's learning when they perceive their child as willing to learn. (p. 2)

If students are able to articulate positive feelings about school and to identify an effort on my part as to the caring for of their self-esteem, they will communicate these sentiments to their parents either verbally or non-verbally.

Students' comments were very positive. They remarked on the positive and cooperative attitudes most displayed. "Well, I think this classroom is a good classroom. It is fair and co-operative." "The things that I really enjoy about this classroom are how everyone treats each other with respect and how there is little teasing. I really like learning in that environment. I also like the positive attitudes and positive reinforcements."

In addition to the relational environment, students commented on the physical environment. "One of the things I enjoy in our classroom is that it's always clean. I enjoy this because I can find things way easier." "I think that having a couch, mats, and pillows in the reading place is a good idea. I think that it's good to have because it makes people feel more comfortable and more at home."

In addition, students commented on the activities and their presentation. "So far, I think that this class is doing fine. I liked how we set up the Medieval Feast." "I sure had fun working in the canteen! [My friend] taught me how to use the popcorn machine!" "What I think is good in this classroom is the Math class. I like it because

we can play with tiles and money, etc. What I think we could change in this class is the reading time. I think that reading time should be longer." This comment was made by one of my weakest students. Quite insightful! "The good thing that we're doing is the Medieval stuff we've been doing like tapestries or the Feast. I like it because it is fun and I, we can take part in showing off the assignments."

One student even commented on the ratio of group work to individual work as well as the use of hands-on methods of instruction.

> I think that one 'bouquet' is the ratio of group work to individual work. ... The use of hands-on methods ... is awesome too. ... The experiments we did this year (not that they all worked out) and the field trips we went on taught me volumes more than I could have taking notes in a classroom. It's way more interesting to explore a coulee or a landslide than to look at overheads about it. ... I'm having one of the best grades of my life, thanks to one of my favorite teachers (namely you).

Another student echoed my outward effort to make our classroom a positive place. "People are all well behaved and we all seem to get along. I feel that our classroom is a positive place to work because everyone tries hard to get along and you, Mrs. Mayne, make sure of it." I view this statement as particularly positive considering the student who made it.

While students were able to identify positive areas within our classroom environment and within my instruction, they did not identify areas for improvement. This lack of identification, I believe, reflects the students' general satisfaction with our classroom. Students commented that they did not have 'beefs' with or 'wishes' for our classroom. "I don't really have any wishes because things are great." "Grade 7 is going great! I have no beefs about this classroom!" " I have no wishes to ask."

Collegial Focus Group

Participant One

Participant One has taught in Regina Public School Division No. 4 for eight years. In September of 1991, she joined my staff on which she taught Grade 6 and 7. From the fall of 1991 until the spring of 1997, we collaborated on many co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, taught in each other's classrooms, and became very comfortable with one another both professionally and personally. Following her transfer from our common school, we stayed in touch by sharing materials, providing professional support, and eventually integrating our classes from the two different schools. She was a natural choice to participate as a "critical friend" and subsequently to be interviewed by me. This new relationship was not significantly different from the one that we have shared over the last eight years. Participant One and I spent one hour one evening formally discussing the findings, the general emerging themes, and the seeming discrepancies in data. She provided feedback in each of these areas. Finally, we examined my current practice and potential areas for modifications.

An important area of concern for me was the discrepancy between parents' responses on the evaluation forms (regarding Demonstration of Learning Conferences) and parents' comments within the structure of the Focus Group. While the evaluation sheet comments were exceedingly positive, the Focus Group comments raised some concerns. First, Participant One suggested the process of Demonstration of Learning Conferences was a new idea. It was natural that there would be tension and a certain level of discomfort during the sessions. Secondly, she

suggested that not everyone automatically liked everything others do and that many parents have difficulty with non-traditional teacher behavior. Further, she questioned the feasibility of holding this type of conference at an inner city school.

Participant One and I discussed the comments by one member of the parent Focus Group. The parent's reaction confused me and seemed unnecessarily negative. Her daughter had been involved in an altercation with another student. I had followed my usual procedure for handling conflicts of this type. A "Thinking Plan" was part of the home communication. The note that the parent returned with her child displaced the responsibility from her child onto the other student involved. As well, she accused me of mishandling a 'sexist situation' and 'siding with the male, abandoning the female.' I felt personally attacked by this parent's comments. Participant One placed the negativity into perspective when she shared an anecdote about her daughter. She explained that when her daughter is confronted with a negative situation, she reacts like a 'mother lion.' She acts first and thinks later. She suggested that this mother might have been reacting in a similar manner. She may have been reacting with haste with the note and would reconsider and eventually touch base with me and explain.

Finally, I shared my data summaries with Participant One and outlined what I viewed to be the emerging themes. She shared her agreement regarding my 'read' of the data. She added a personal note about her feelings towards parent involvement. Participant One did not use the word partnership. She expressed her anger towards parents who do not care for the basic needs of their children. She shared how children come to her school inadequately clothed and hungry. She wanted to know

how a teacher could possibly want to partner with parents such as these. Her emotional attachment to the children was obvious from this statement. She further shared a story about a boy whose mother was very abusive toward him and toward her within the context of the conference situation. She expressed her discomfort and desire to be removed from it. In the end, Participant One's comments highlight the question whether it is possible to partner with all parents. Is partnership the correct term? Is relationship a better term?

Participant Two

Participant Two and I have been colleagues for eight years and friends for significantly longer. During her career, she has worked as a Kindergarten to Grade 8 Core French itinerant and a Middle Years teacher. During our time in university as well as throughout our careers, Participant Two and I have interacted on a professional level in addition to our personal connection. We have shared materials and provided support and feedback on various professional endeavors. We have taken graduate level courses together, functioned as editors, critical friends, and support mechanisms for each other. We read each other's work, have brainstormed together, and have provided constructive criticism of each other's work.

This multitude of professional interactions as well as our personal connection has allowed Participant Two and me to develop the relationship necessary for her to act as a 'critical friend.' During a one-hour meeting one evening, she confirmed the same things that Participant One had in our earlier meeting. Participant Two said that, within her experience, new ideas often take time to be accepted. She reminded me of a change theorist that we had heard speak who said that change could take

upwards of five years to be completely integrated and accepted by people. That was an important comment for me.

Participant Two expressed her own hesitations regarding complete partnership. She shared anecdotes about parents with whom she has established very positive relationships. However, she shared that the few very difficult parents color her view of partnership and make her want to pull back and cut off the relationship.

Participant Two's interpretation of the interaction with the upset mother varied somewhat from Participant One's. First of all, she expressed her sadness that I had to endure such a situation. She explained that she was able to empathize. She said that people say that we, as teachers, need to be professional and need to 'toughen up' and learn to take it. She questioned why. She said that no matter who is treating me this way, it is abusive, inappropriate and should not be tolerated. In the end, she felt that we, as educators, need to set a standard and refuse to speak with abusive and sometimes threatening people. At the time, I felt it was an overstatement and perhaps a product of the kind of school she taught in.

Again, the non-linear aspect of action research became apparent. After leaving the interview with Participant One and before conducting this interview, I began to reflect on my terminology. I questioned whether partnership was the desired end or whether, in fact, developing a relationship was more realistic. Upon entering the interview with Participant Two, I posed the question to her. Participant Two confirmed my initial conclusions regarding partnerships. She also felt that perhaps relationship was a better term to describe the experience. As well, she felt that students hold the key to establishing positive relationships. Ultimately,

Demonstration of Learning Conferences attempt to shift responsibility for learning to the learner. Teachers provide structured learning experiences, while parents provide learning supports. Both critical friends saw the partnership concept as an important step in the shift of learning responsibility.

So, What Does This All Seem to Mean: My Personal Reflections

> *What we have to do is to be forever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions. (Pater in Roger & McWilliams, 1992, p. 53)*

Critics of the action research approach would cite the sheer quantity of data as an area of concern. It is indeed a daunting task to collect, to manage, and to make sense of the volume of recorded data. Laura Berman Fortgang (1999) mused "What is a vision? It is a compelling image of an achievable future" (p. 133). This compelling vision is what directs and helps to focus the mass of collected research data. My vision is an achievable future. It came at the beginning of this process upon reading Barry Spilchuk (1996). A relationship is developed one moment at a time. The purpose of this research was intended to provide the means for maximizing the moments with parents and students in order to develop a positive relationship. The smooth transition of children becoming youth and then young adults requires strong family relationships or partnerships. Demonstration of Learning Conferences provides a step in this direction. With this vision in mind, the reflection phase of Cycle One became a more pleasurable experience for me.

Cycle One of this research project unfolded slowly and painstakingly over about three months, providing much data which, at first, seemed to be overwhelming. What does the data mean? The findings are referred to by Max van Manen (1990) as the "theory of the unique; that is, theory eminently suitable to deal with this particular

pedagogic situation, this school, that child, or this class of youngsters" (p. 155). Several tentative themes emerged in answer to my research questions. It is important to note, at this point, that while several themes seem to be surfacing, their purpose was to inform action in Cycle Two.

Students: The Critical Link

First, to partner with parents is a labor and time intensive process involving all partners (parents, teachers, and especially students). Because the parent child link is crucial, the establishment of concurrent relationships is key. That means that while considering how a relationship between a parent and the teacher can be established and maintained, the relationship between the teacher and student must be fostered.

The role that students play in the relationship seems to be becoming much clearer. Generally, a positive relationship with a pupil paves the way for a positive relationship with the parent. If a child is happy at school, the parent is happy too. Therefore, students become the ambassadors of our classroom. They serve as the primary communicators getting or not getting messages home. Direct contact is necessary, but happy children are also important.

Differing Definitions of Partnership

'Partnering with parents' means different things to different people and, in fact, may be the incorrect term. While most participants in my research embraced the term, there were some parents who stated outright that they did not want to be partners. Some parents felt it was the responsibility of their children to partner. "I don't want to be a partner. By Grade Seven, I want my child to be. I want my child to look after all of these things. I want her to talk to you. ... I don't want to talk to

you very often." While this parent does not present the view of the majority of participants, her position must be taken into account. Therefore, the goal of the teacher should be to develop whatever relationship is possible with each parent.

Replacing the term 'partnership' with 'relationship' allows more latitude and implies a much less restricted interaction.

> The partnership construct is based on the premise that collaborating partners have some common basis for action and a sense of mutuality that supports their joint ventures. Teachers and parents have a common need for joining together in partnership: the need to foster positive growth in children and in themselves. (Swick, 1992, p. 1)

Not all parents choose to collaborate nor do all have a common basis for action. Some parents choose not to interact with the teacher or simply want to be given a Progress Report. Therefore, there is no common basis for action. Thus, the term 'partner' is inaccurate.

As well, according to the working definition provided by Swick (1992), when parents and teachers partner, they are engaged in joint ventures. Some participants contradicted this definition. "Although the teacher takes responsibility for my children during school time, I'm the one that has my child most of the time. So that teacher, in fact, spends a smaller period of time of that child's life than I do." This distinction between parental time and teacher time does not support the notion of a joint venture. In fact, it tends to imply a separation and thus causes a re-thinking of the term 'partnership.'

Attributes of Fostering Parent Teacher Relationships

Despite the evolving terminology, some consistent attributes seem to remain that enhance the relationship between parents, teachers and students. An inviting and

comfortable climate must be fostered for both parents and students. Parents and students resoundingly commented upon the necessity of a positive climate. Parents must feel comfortable in the company of the teacher, as must students. As well, constant communication, be it information sharing or problem solving, is absolutely necessary. Built into that is the involvement of all partners. Parents want to know what activities their child is involved in and how their child is progressing both academically and socially. Students want to know what is being said by teachers to parents and vice versa. As well, they appreciate having a voice in these discussions. Parents and students both cite many examples of communication strategies. Telephone calls and agendas are examples.

The recurring themes were a very positive result of the Cycle One data. Within each data collection situation (Focus Groups and evaluation sheets, for example), parents and students echoed each other. Many of same themes came up over and over in each of the data sources. This triangulation of data lends credibility to the findings. Triangulation of data refers to the combination of various methods of data collection. Its purpose is for "contrasting and comparing different accounts of the same situation. ... In addition where the different perspectives agree with one another, the interpretation is considered more credible" (Altrichter et al., 1993, p. 117). By having themes confirmed by more than one data source, the validity of my emerging themes is strengthened.

Planning for the Next Cycle – Developing an Understanding

> *As we penetrate into matter, nature does not show us any isolated "basic building blocks," but rather appears as a complicated web of relations between the various parts of the whole. (Capra as cited in Roger & McWilliams, 1992, p. 69)*

What did Cycle Two hold? What changes was I going to make to my practice in an attempt to respond to the thoughts of the participants? First, I will consistently make positive telephone calls. Parents spoke glowingly about other teachers who have done this. They also noted that I do a number of things to communicate positive messages, but they did not mention that I make telephone calls. This omission indicates an area for improvement for me, as the teacher. During this next cycle, an attempt will be made to make five telephone contacts per week to highlight some positive occurrence at school.

I will examine the evolving terminology more closely with my Focus Groups and try to establish exactly what it is that makes the parent teacher relationship unique. In addition, the impact of students' views on the parent teacher relationship will be examined to determine whether or not there is a direct or indirect link between parental views and student views of the school.

Cycle Two

Developing an understanding of the 'lived experience,' of the parent, teacher, and student experience within the school relationship is the primary concern of this research.

> Lived experience is the starting point and the end point of [interpretive inquiry]. The aim ... is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful; a notion by

> which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience. (van Manen, 1990, p. 36)

This "textual expression of [the experience's] essence" was a development of Cycle One. I finished the cycle with a heightened awareness of the impact of students on the parent teacher relationship. As well, I have a better understanding of the milieu in which the relationship occurs, that is, the critical attributes that form the basis. As well, I am developing an understanding of how parents and students experience this relationship. These learnings form the starting point for Cycle Two.

Cycle Two, of this research, is a quest for clarification of terms and for a deeper examination of parents', students', and my own understanding of the parent teacher partnership experience. During Cycle Two, a Parent Focus Group Meeting, a Student Focus Group Meeting, a Critical Friend Interview, and summative comments from both students and parents comprise my data collection. Each of the Focus Group meeting formats explored my research questions and clarified the experiences and perspectives of the participants.

The Context

The physical context for Cycle Two data collection remained the same and the same participants and grade 7 and 8 classroom were used. However, Cycle One's findings forced me to significantly modify my perceptions and understandings. At the beginning of Cycle One of this action research project, my intent was to gather information and ideas to deepen my understanding of a partnership and the experiences and perceptions of each stakeholder. By the end of Cycle One, I was able to "[transform] practices, understandings and situations ... in which some practices or elements of them are continuous through the improvement process while

others are discontinuous" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 182). I had incorporated Demonstration of Learning Conferences into my practice because of the "transformation of my understanding."

Initiating Action

Upon entering Cycle Two, my data collection was much more focused. My questions, in all meeting formats, centered around the exploration of partnership and its definition, and the articulation of the "[transformation of] lived experience into a textual expression of its essence" (van Manen, 1990, p. 36). My action became a quest for clarity of terminology. As well, it included a deepening of the understanding of the parent and student experience. In the 'action' phase of Cycle Two, Parent and Student Focus Group meetings were held.

Parent Focus Group Meeting

My Parent Focus Group met one evening at 7:00 p.m. for one and a half hours in my backyard. My home had been the location for Cycle One's Focus Group meeting. It had been received positively and allowed for the open dialogue that I sought. Therefore, I chose it as the location for Cycle Two's Focus Group meeting. Parents seemed focused and positive. My flower garden was in full bloom, creating a very peaceful, informal setting. Five of the nine members who volunteered were able to attend – representing one grade eight student and four grade seven students. The parents and I had worked together for the year and were all relatively comfortable with each other. Thus, the group was eager to contribute and readily tackled each question and issue presented.

Upon sharing the data summary and my initial themes, confirmation emerged from the evening's discussion. Again, parents identified relational attributes like comfort, caring for self-esteem, responsibility, and climate as being necessary to the development of a good parent teacher relationship. They also identified the structural attribute of two-way communication as being of paramount importance. Parents discussed these attributes in ideal terms and also in terms of their existence in our relationship. The primary insight for the evening was confirmation of the parents' experience. Cycle One's parent Focus Group meeting explored the technical aspects, the tangibles of our relationship. This meeting produced a strong sense of the intangible, the feelings associated with being a parent.

Our discussion began by describing how parents describe partnering. "The word partner ... draws a picture of two people who are on the same page. ... You have the same goals for that child and the same expectations." This parent discussed the mutual venture and mutual goals of the partnership experience. "To me, partnering would be that two people or a group of people have sat down and actually communicated what their goals and expectations are so that everyone has had some opportunity for input." This parent added to the definition by identifying open communication as being necessary.

Student Focus Group Meeting

My Student Focus Group met after school for one hour. Considering the positive feedback received from the Parent Focus Group with regard to the meeting at my home, the same setting was established for my students. The meeting began with a review of the topics previously covered as well as my preliminary conclusions

which students supported. Students were, then, asked to define partnership and how they felt about it. Subsequently, students were given an opportunity to critique the entire year. The ensuing discussion was frank and open. Words, such as, meeting and communicating were frequently used. In addition, they discussed how they felt about partnering with parents and the mixed feelings that they had related about these relationships. Many concluded that they thought partnerships were necessary, but seemed to recognize that some students had negative parental relationships. Students discussed how I was able to identify the way parents wanted to interact and then how I made adjustments in regard to their parents' personal style for interaction. Lastly, students identified some practices that they felt helped the partnership relationship.

"I think [partnership] means that you stay in touch with [parents] and you communicate with them and talk about what you're doing. More so, if there's problems or stuff like that." Another student added to the first by saying that "I think that it means just basically meeting, not even meeting, talking with them but not even talking with them, communicating with them. More often than just when those conferences are coming up or when there's a problem." Both students recognized that partnerships go beyond basic communication. Parents need to be informed by a number of means – meetings or talking on a regular basis. However, the implication is that there needs to be openness to the process. Parents always need to know what is going on and need to feel involved in the process.

Students also felt that it was very important for them to be part of the process. They did not mind parents and teachers meeting as long as their voice was represented and valued within the process. "I like it a lot better that you're there and

you get to talk to your teacher too. Because if the teacher doesn't like remember something, you can say 'oh wait that's not how it happened.'" The implication was that being present within conference situations allows the child's input into the process that so directly affects them. The converse implication is that to not be allowed the opportunity makes them feel less valued as their voice is not even taken into consideration.

Students identified differing family situations as well as different philosophies for interaction. In doing so, students discussed how I had tailored my partnership to the needs or wants of each family. "Well, my family thinks that the kid is supposed to be in charge. Parents don't really have to be included in stuff. Kids have to make the decision if it's something really big. That's how we partner. You partner with me not my parents." This student was able to articulate her parents' perceptions and then voiced my response to her parents' perceptions. She stated that her parents want her to be the direct partner and that is what has happened. "Well, it's different for me. You've known my parents for a lot longer than you've known [her] parents. So, your relationship varies. Like if you're already friends with them and have worked with them or something. You know them better." This student called my partnership with her parents a 'friendship.' The interaction that she sees is an informal dialogue that takes place spontaneously when we happen to meet. As well, this student saw my communication with her father often taking the form of quick e-mails. She knows that the relationship, cultivated with her parents, is different than the relationship with the first parent. However, her underlying meaning is that it has been effective because she does view it as a friendship.

> I think it's important to my mom that you make the effort to talk to her. It shows that she's important to you as a parent. It shows that you're willing to take the time. But that's also how she likes to communicate with other people. She talks to them a lot. ... She's really strong on that. [Another student interrupts.] It's important to my mom too because I don't tell her everything.

First, these two students identify the importance of establishing the partnerships with parents. Second, their tacit approval is inherent. They seem to be saying 'They are important. They are needed. And they are okay.' "I think it's good if you're involved with my parents, but if I were in trouble I probably wouldn't want that. [I'd] probably be in trouble more." This student was able to empathize with other students whose relationships with me involve more redirection. She surmised that such a student would not necessarily be as open to a partnership between his parents and the teacher as she would be.

Students identified specific practices that made the year more positive for them.

> At the beginning of the year, you sent home that note that showed parents what you expect, the thing with the triangle with how everyone relates. It talked about how you teach and what you expect so I guess that would be one way.

This student felt that the 'Teacher Expectations Hand Out' that had been distributed in September was effective in making an initial contact with the home. Another student identified my deliberate attempt to establish a 'risk-free' classroom as significant.

> I think it was different from last year in some ways because of the different class. We had the 'risk-free' environment. You didn't insist on it as much last year. It might be partly because of the students you had. You have to make adjustments for the students you have.

She felt that trying to establish the supportive climate made her feel more secure and positive about her year. As well, students identified the new conference format (Demonstration of Learning Conferences) as being a significant and positive change.

> You tried the new conferences and I liked that a lot better. We also really liked three way conferences. They're way better than when parents and teachers just met. They'd come home and you'd be like ... so what did she say?

The underlying implication is that the new conference format allowed for student voice and helped them to feel a part of the process.

Reflecting on Action

The reflection phase of Cycle Two included both parents' and students' summative reflections as well as discussions with my critical friends. In this phase, I attempted to make sense of the seeming incongruity between the term partnership and what I was hearing from parents.

Parent Reflections on the Year

At the end of the 1998-99 school year, I asked parents to complete an evaluation of the year and its occurrences. One constraint to this particular evaluation was that the questions were not structured in such a way so as to elicit specific details. Parents' comments, while general, were informative. They noted my efforts to partner with parents and expressed appreciation for the care taken in working with their children.

Parents, again, reiterated comments about my going 'above and beyond the call of duty' that had surfaced at other points during the research. "You have gone above and beyond the call of duty." This statement denotes a recognition that I have made a notable effort to partner with them. They expressed their need to have their

child's self-esteem cared for. "Your work in organizing camp and supervising other activities were certainly 'labors of love.'" Parents cited the example of the Outdoor Education experience, noting that it was a labor of love. This particular phrase seems to imply that parents recognized genuineness on my part. They felt that my effort was a genuine attempt to partner with them. Interactions were recognized as authentic.

They expressed their appreciation for the continuing guidance and leadership by example. "Under your leadership [my child] has strengthened and improved as a student." This comment addresses the perceived value and authenticity of the student teacher partnerships. It also reminds us of the potentially influential role that students play in partnering with parents (Epstein, 1986, Epstein & Becker, 1982, Ames et al., 1993, Ames et al., 1995). "[My child's] life has taken hold and gained ground because of you and your clear guidance." This comment also re-iterates parents' need to have their child's self-esteem cared for. This parent has identified the positive relationship that I had established with students. Middle Years students work positively with people that they view as being credible (George et al., 1998). George et al. (1998) describe it as a need for fact. Middle Years students have a need for people to be honest with them and 'tell it like it is.' People who do this are regarded as credible. Therefore, the implication is that I have treated my students in such a manner.

Student Reflections on the Year

Students, like parents, were asked to complete a summative evaluation, examining the year and commenting on its highs and lows. As with the parent

evaluation, a constraint to this particular evaluation was that the questions were not structured in such a way so as to elicit specific details. Students' comments were very positive highlighting many of the events and interactions. They discussed the kind of climate that had been established in this Middle Years classroom during the year as well as the kind of care that I took for the individual. In some instances, in a profound and deep way, they expressed their appreciation for the kind of positive relationship that had been established, noting the possible future impact it would hold in their lives. Overall, students focused on relational attributes. In fact, not one student made mention of a structural attribute.

"I actually enjoyed coming to school in the mornings and learning." This student's comment demonstrates the kinds of climate that she felt in my Middle Years classroom. The inference that can be drawn was that she felt safe and accepted. In other words, her self-esteem was cared for. She was able to identify the positive student experience that she had experienced. "You were always there to talk to, whether it was about homework, a math question, friends, and family and even boys. You helped me get through so many conflicts." This student's comment also identifies the support and guidance she received. She expressed her appreciation for having someone to talk with and to counsel her when needed. "This year I found myself coming to school always looking forward to something (even though the day would consist of math and science). I have never once dreaded coming to school this year." This statement underlines the idea that most Middle Years students do not necessarily come to school for the academics. The academic subjects do not hold importance for most students at this level. The question becomes why do they come

to school? "You taught me a million things this year ... You are truly a great teacher." In light of this comment, the likely inference would be that students felt they received other 'lessons.' Perhaps the inference to be made is that students experienced positive social interaction and received positive feedback and credible guidance from me, as the teacher.

"You took me under your wing and taught me to be a fine young man. You did this when most teachers would have shrugged me off as another messed up kid." This student's comments possibly indicate other negative experiences he has encountered while in school. This boy worked in my room for two years and did prove to be challenging. However, in his eyes, I did not give up on him, but continued to work with him. This statement says to me that I accepted and met the student where he was and formed a plan for working with him. In the end, this experience was positive and my actions spoke deeply to him.

"I will forever remember the lessons you taught me and you will be the teacher that when I am thanking the people who made me a success." Knowing this boy, as I do, the lessons to which he refers are not academic lessons. He is referring to the multitude of informal social counseling sessions he received. This boy is another with whom I have worked for two years. When we first began working together two years ago, it became obvious very quickly that he had serious anger management issues. He would throw things, swear, storm out, or slam doors (to name a few behaviors) each time that he was confronted. After contacting his parents and addressing this issue with them, we determined that providing anger management strategies for him might be a possible intervention. Our first year together was

characterized by constant struggles and almost indeterminable progress. However, his parents, the boy, and I worked together. At the start of the second year, this boy blossomed. At times, we still did some informal counseling in the hallway outside of my door, but it occurred less frequently. As well, the outbursts occurred with much less force. By the end of the year, this student was managing his anger in a responsible and socially appropriate way. Thus his comments "I will forever remember the lessons you taught me and you will be the teacher that when I am thanking the people who made me a success" speak deeply to me, but also, indicate a recognition on his part of his own progress.

Collegial Focus Group Discussions

> *... A unique relationship develops among team members who enter into dialogue regularly. They develop a deep trust that cannot help but carry over to discussions. They develop a richer understanding of the uniqueness of each person's point of view. (Peter Senge as cited in McCarthy, 1996, p. 364)*

My Collegial Focus Group discussions took place over several sessions. I reviewed my own feelings regarding the partnership experience and gauged my colleagues' feelings. An additional purpose was to check my own perceptions and to verify the emerging patterns from the data. I found that many teachers feel quite negatively when considering parent partnerships. In some instances, this stems from negative and confrontational experiences with parents. In other instances, it stems from anger towards the basic care that some parents fail to provide for their children. As well, in other instances, it stemmed from a lack of confidence within teachers regarding the value of their work.

While the number of parents who behave abusively towards teachers is in the minority, it does have a very strong impact on teachers. It makes them hesitant and

less willing to cultivate relationships with parents. "I had this parent come to me and yell and scream at me for something that wasn't my fault. Sure they were frustrated, but that doesn't give them the right to do that to me" (Participant, Collegial Focus Group #2). "I don't honestly want to work with parents in the older grades. I find them to be a problem. I've had too many problems in the past" (Participant, Collegial Focus Group #2). This teacher's frustrations with negative experiences in the past are obvious. It has made her very skeptical about trying to establish any kind of a relationship.

Teachers expressed frustration at working with some parents. They stated that some parents are wonderful to work with, while others are very difficult. "Working with parents can be gratifying or frustrating. The gratifying experiences come when you know that together the best interests of their child have been served. Frustrations come when the differences in commitment to their children become evident" (Participant, Collegial Focus Group #2). This teacher identifies lack of commitment as a frustration in working with parents.

"You need a similar vision in order for it to be successful otherwise you run into roadblocks constantly because what you had hoped to achieve with their children isn't what they feel is important" (Participant, Collegial Focus Group #2). This teacher underlines the potential difficulties when parents and teachers do not have a mutual commitment. She explains that without a common vision parents and teachers may have conflicting goals. This teacher believes that a complete lack of goals often can be a problem. "I find that there is a level of apathy in many parents. They want to send their child to school and not be bothered any more with their children's

formal education" (Participant, Collegial Focus Group #2). This level of apathy negatively affects children at school. When behavioral issues arise there is little proactive support that teachers can provide because there is a lack of home support. "I don't think there's anything you can do about it. You're going to have problems with their child because there'll be no follow through at home" (Participant, Collegial Focus Group #2).

> You need to involve them in the school, in the classroom and their school work. In Middle Years, the way I look at a partnership with parents is more a communication between teacher child and student. So, three-way conferences, involving them in their child's schoolwork are ways to achieve student success. (Participant, Collegial Focus Group #2)

Thus, despite the negative experiences, teachers remain hopeful, yet cautious that attempting to cultivate partnerships with parents is the best way to help students grow and develop as people.

My Personal Reflections

My notion of partnership has undergone an evolutional change through this research. I began the process believing that, according to the definition, partnerships refer to parents and teachers working together cooperatively and collaboratively, having mutual goals, responsibilities and rights with the intent of fostering positive growth within students. Following Cycle One, my understandings were revised to believe that relationship is a more important term than partnership with many parents. I believed that partnerships could not exist with every family. In some instances, they were not wanted. In others, families were unable to establish this kind of interaction. Yet, I was perplexed because I felt that partnership needed to be the underlying goal. If our objective, as educators, is to establish the most effective milieu in which

learning can be facilitated, parents must be included. Literature-cited research findings support this. Yet, my research findings seemed to suggest that partnership was not possible in all cases. By the end of Cycle Two, my concept of partnership had evolved. I could see that parents did embrace the partnership notion. The definition failed when I tried to create a linear picture of 'a partnership' rather than taking into account the uniqueness of each family. In reality, partnerships constantly change with each family. I have come to view the partnership experience as individual experiences, with their inherent natures changing amidst dynamic family interactions.

In many ways, partnership is an existential concept (van Manen, 1990, p. 172). Partnerships are unique to the individuals involved. They are unique to the given set of parents, student and teacher. They are temporal, spatial, corporeal, and social (van Manen, 1990). Partnerships are temporal in that they occupy the space of time in which both partners are directly interested in the child, the time span that a child forms part of a given classroom. They are spatial in that they occur within a given classroom. They are corporeal in that they are unique to the individuals involved. Finally, they are social in that the relationship that exists between a given family and teacher is unique. The relationship and the way in which the partnership manifests itself change from family to family.

So, What Does This All Mean?

The question now becomes where do I go from here. Altrichter et al. (1993) would suggest that the search for patterns becomes the next quest through examining the various texts looking for "'regularities of behaviour' or 'forms of interaction

which occur over and over again'" (p. 134). Van Manen (1982) would suggest that pedagogical reflection would be in order, explaining that "it bestows the adult with the opportunity to be fundamentally accountable for his educative work with children ... being accountable, responsible, or answerable to the fundamental, that is, to the foundational, the essential, or the recollective" (p. 283). This sort of reflection according to van Manen (1990), attempts to "grasp the essential meaning of something" (p. 77).

My research has been concerned with "the reality of lived experiences" (van Manen, 1982, p. 296). Repeatedly, I have asked myself 'how do parents, students, and teachers experience the partnership relationship?' The answer is caged in the "language of ... pedagogy ... [requiring] a responsive reading [of the data]" (p. 299). Thus, the answer "intends to be silent as it speaks ... [requiring] that we be sensitively attentive to the silence about the words by means of which we attempt to disclose the deep meaning of our world" (p. 299). The answer is "pedagogical theorizing ... the attempt to achieve [an] understanding which goes beyond language and description" (p. 298).

In the next two chapters, I try to bridge the gap between theory and practice. In Chapter Five, I engage in pedagogical theorizing by "[being] sensitively attentive to the silence about the words" (p. 298). In Chapter Six, I ground the pedagogical theorizing within the action research approach attempting to demonstrate that "the space of human understanding is *within* the lived world of practice and human relationships" (Smits, 1997, p. 293).

CHAPTER FIVE

UNDERSTANDING PARTNERSHIP DIFFERENTLY

> Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible without surrender be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, ... Be yourself. Especially, do not feign affection. ... Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be, and whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul. (Ehrmann, 1997, p. 245)

These words, that began and now end my research journey, hold many of the keys to partnering, by laying out the blueprint for establishing and maintaining effective working relationships with parents. First, I need to move through relationships calmly but positively, ensuring that I speak truthfully but not hurtfully nor forcefully, as truth is forceful in and of itself. Next, I need to speak openly with parents and interact in an honest and honorable way. Lastly, I need to be at peace with myself as an educator, understanding my own personal belief system and all the time keeping my vision in focus.

Essential Themes

"In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is" (van Manen, 1990, p. 107). Van Manen clearly articulates the criteria for determining essential themes. At the outset, my objective was to understand and to improve parent teacher partnerships. Therefore, the themes that should have emerged would have assisted my understanding and provided strategies for improving parent teacher partnerships. Without an understanding of how parents, students, and teachers experience the partnership

relationship, its true nature would remain murky and indefinable. This understanding would provide the framework for implementing strategies to improve this relationship. Therefore, both aspects are keys to determining the true nature of the parent teacher partnership experience.

I have come to a new understanding of what it is to be a parent and of the link between fostering self-esteem in the classroom and cultivating parent teacher partnerships. I have a deeper understanding of my role as an educator and the impact that it potentially has on students and parents. In addition, I recognize that teaching is not solely the domain of the educator. There is a mutually educative element. Each stakeholder, in turn, provides new insights for the others. Lastly, perhaps the most significant discovery that I made was of the emerging dialectic between the personal and professional sides of teaching and its impact upon each stakeholder.

A Deeper Understanding of the Parents' Experience

> You have to make sure that your child is important to that teacher because sometimes I think some parents feel that a teacher just sees them as a group and so if you [as the teacher] can come across and say one important thing [say] 'Yes. Your child is important to me.' (Participant, Parent Focus Group Meeting #2)

This comment seems to synthesize the parents' experience. Educators spend a minimum of five hours a day interacting with, influencing, and guiding that child. Parents need to know that their child is important to the teacher. That is what constitutes the partnership experience from the parents' perspective.

Experiencing Partnership

As stated at the outset of this research, partnership is experienced when parents and teachers work together cooperatively and collaboratively and have mutual

goals, responsibilities, and rights with the intent of fostering positive growth within students. Parents voiced this message, students voiced this message, and teachers voiced this message.

> To me, partnering would be that two people or a group of people have sat down and actually have communicated what their goals and expectations are so that everyone has had some opportunity for input. Because, as a parent, parents know their children differently than an educator would. So, I think that partnership would be focusing on the shared goals and expectations. (Participant, Parent Focus Group Meeting #2)

This participant summarized how parents experience partnership. First, parents want to be actively involved in their child's education. Next, they want their child to be viewed as important and as an individual. As well, parents want to be recognized as knowledgeable about their child and as able to contribute a unique perspective. These sentiments characterize the partnership experience for parents.

Trust between the parent and the teacher is also a primary component. "... All I know is that when [my daughter] comes home, she talks about you all of the time. Her faith in you is what makes me trust you" (Participant, Parent Focus Group Meeting #2). This trust is the knowledge that the child feels valued and important in the eyes of her teacher. Parents need to trust their child's teacher, but the child needs to trust the teacher in the first place. It is that child's trust and faith that communicates competency to parents, thus helping to establish the link between the fostering of student's self-esteem and the development of parent teacher partnerships.

Recognizing each family unit as a unique entity and individually tailoring our partnership is another primary component. Some families choose to become actively involved and intimately acquainted with their children's teachers. Others feel that supporting the school's programming is important, but being visible in school is

either unnecessary or unfeasible. Still, other families are so mired in the circumstances of their lives (addictions, abusive situations, or poverty) that they are unable to be active or visible. However, each family and, in turn, all children deserve the same opportunities. Teachers need to actively cultivate trust, open communication and the obvious sense that each child is important.

> I do a lot of volunteer work, but I don't want to be a partner. By Grade Seven, I want my child to be. I want my child to look after all of these things. I want her to talk to you. Like I may suggest or want to know what she's doing. And she'll have to come back to me to talk about it, but I don't want to talk to you very often. (Participant, Parent Focus Group Meeting #1)

This parent clearly has articulated her views on partnership. She believes that the partnership should exist between her child and the teacher, rather than between herself and the teacher. While she would not call it partnership, I would. I believe that, for this family, a direct partnership with the child is of primary importance and a secondary or indirect partnership with the home is what is desired. While this parent's view was in the minority of the participants, it aptly demonstrates the need for each family to be recognized as unique and to have their partnership individually tailored.

A Child's Self-esteem

> *The interactions a student has with the teacher can have a powerful influence on the development of student self-concept. (Sprick as cited in Honoring Diversity, 1996, p. 28)*

For Middle Years students, peer relationships are of particular importance. George et al. (1998) discusses a need for belonging that is inextricably tied to the child's self- concept. Acceptance or non-acceptance by the peer group often dictates a child's self-esteem. Non-acceptance serves as an indicator to Middle Years

students that they are not normal and therefore are failures. Middle Years teachers often find themselves wading into the murky waters of peer relationships because these relationships constitute the most important aspect of a Middle Years student's life. Peer relationships also can have such a profound impact upon their self-esteem. The parents involved in the Focus Group expressed a need to have their child's self-esteem cared for. Some expressed this need as an expectation; others identified it as an occurrence in the classroom. "My expectation for you as a teacher is to recognize what girls and boys are like at this age [Middle Years students] and to deal with it. I expect that if I call you regarding these issues that you will deal with them" (Participant, Parent Focus Group #1). This participant identified the Middle Years student's social interaction as being an important factor. Her implication is that often times, this relationship between boys and girls is negative. By saying that "[I need] to recognize what boys and girls are like at this age," this participant implies that the genders can treat one another in a negative manner. She states her expectation that I, as the educator, address these interactions to ensure that her child has positive experiences and that her child's self-concept is not damaged.

> You go through pimples, braces, glasses. And you become targeted by your peers. But when a teacher recognizes this and protects them. ... This is an awful year. I mean for girls in particular, the way girls treat each other. ... 'You are fat; you are ugly.' You are constantly ridiculed. It's good for the teacher to understand that and respond accordingly. I mean they can come home and we can deal with it, but sometimes unless [children] hear it at the time and place, it doesn't make a great deal of difference. (Participant, Parent Focus Group #1)

This participant describes the situation for some Middle Years girls and the needed intervention.

> [Peer relationships] are the focus of our daughter's concerns. That's all she is concerned about at this point in her life. Not her marks. Not studies. It is the playground situations. ... And I notice that you are not afraid to tackle that. ... A lot of teachers would [walk away from it] and just say, 'No. Let the chips fall where they may!' But you want to direct those chips or help those chips fall the right way or find out how come the chips are falling. (Participant, Parent Focus Group #1)

This parent recognizes willingness on my part to counsel students on peer relationships and assist them with having a positive understanding emerge from what may be a negative experience.

Dealing effectively with Middle Years peer relationships seems to be assisted by the reflective process. "[Reflective teaching] is a form of problem solving in which you try to better understand and solve problems or concerns of personal importance" (Saskatchewan Instructional Development and Research Unit, 1993, p. 10). This process includes three characteristics. The first is open-mindedness – an "active desire to listen to more sides than one; to give heed to the facts from whatever source they come, to give full attention to alternative possibilities" (Dewey as cited in *Honoring Diversity*, Saskatchewan Professional Development Unit, 1996, p. 9). The second characteristic is responsibility - the consideration of "long-range goals as well as immediate issues and feeling responsible for helping to fashion a more equitable and humane tomorrow" (LaBoskey as cited in *Honoring Diversity*, Saskatchewan Professional Development Unit, 1996, p. 9). The third is whole-heartedness - "the strength to move beyond abstract notions and put ideals into practice. [It is] a willingness to take risks and act despite the fear of being criticized, disturbing tradition and making changes" (p. 9). Open-mindedness, responsibility, and whole-heartedness do characterize how these challenging situations can be managed. By

employing the reflective practitioner approach, "teachers act with and for students to ensure that the potential of all students is fulfilled and their inherent human dignity is maintained" (p. 5).

> I know that my daughter is no angel. She gets into trouble at school. But, with you, it has been different. A lot of other teachers have just focused on the negative things. Where with you, she does have good qualities and you have reinforced them. Not just with me, but more importantly to her. (Participant, Parent Focus Group #1)

This parent observes that I recognize the good in students and communicate it to them, in the process caring for their self-esteem.

> When teachers create a caring and supportive classroom climate for all students, they head off many of the classroom's potential discipline problems. Students are less likely to be disruptive for people whom they respect, know are genuinely interested in them, and view as being genuine. Thus, a teacher's attitude toward students with behavioural problems is critical. (*Planning Together,* Saskatchewan Professional Development Unit, 1996, p. 27)

In this instance, while admittedly the student demonstrates inappropriate behavior, her self-esteem has been maintained because positive messages have been communicated both to the student and to the home.

Communication

Increased communication is one key to a deeper understanding of the mutual experience of schooling. With increased communication, there is an increased understanding for all parties which, in turn, holds a key to partnerships that are more effective. However, communication is a widely bandied term and evokes a certain image. Communication can be defined as "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior" (*Webster's*, 1991, p. 266). I would suggest that communication is a much broader term than simply writing a note to a parent or making a telephone call. It

encompasses every interaction, as indicated by the definition. As Spilchuk (1996) noted, it occurs "one moment at a time" (p. 32).

> I really love the fact that I can phone you and say I know that [my daughter] doesn't have her homework done, ... It's like we're working together. I will hand out a punishment at home ... and you almost feed off of that at school. ... It's like we have a mutual plan. (Participant, Parent Focus Group #1)

This anecdote demonstrates that the communication via the telephone is merely the vehicle by which this partnering moment occurs. The true substance of this interaction is the sense that the parent has of our mutuality of action. She and I are working together to support one another with regard to her daughter's incomplete homework. This sense of mutuality of action is an aspect of partnership.

> I think informal evenings are also an opportunity that say to me as a parent, she believes and cares enough for my child that she is also willing and ready to give up her own time and to involve me as a parent. I think so often we as parents say 'Oh, there's not an opportunity' and it's easy to say that. I also feel, as an educator and a parent that sometimes with the face to face things, little issues can be dealt with before they become major concerns. (Participant, Parent Focus Group #2)

This parent describes informal evenings as an opportunity for communication. They facilitate the addressing of minor issues that can be tackled together and can be planned for before they escalate into large issues. "Neither teachers nor parents can reasonably assume that successful prevention or intervention can be carried out in only one setting. It must be a cooperative venture that integrates intervention in both school and home" (Reid & Patterson as cited in *Planning Together*, Saskatchewan Professional Development Unit, 1996, p. 37). The communication at the informal evening becomes the vehicle for the development of a mutual intervention strategy. It is mutual because both parents and the teacher determine the strategy and support it.

Partnership is experienced when parents and teachers work together cooperatively and collaboratively, having mutual goals, responsibilities, and rights with the intent of fostering positive growth within students. Within the partnership model, each family needs to be recognized as unique and to have their partnership individually tailored. Open-mindedness, responsibility, and whole-heartedness characterize the management of partnership situations. By employing the reflective practitioner approach, "teachers act with and for students to ensure that the potential of all students is fulfilled and their inherent human dignity is maintained" (Honoring Diversity, Saskatchewan Professional Development Unit, 1996, p. 5). Finally, communication is the vital tool for connecting parents and teachers. However, the vehicle through which this partnering moment occurs changes its form depending on the situation. Thus, the true substance of each interaction is the sense that the parent has of a mutuality of action between himself and the teacher.

An interesting question raised by this research is the role of gender in establishing Focus Groups. When examining Focus Groups (parent, student and colleague), each was comprised of almost entirely women. I have already discussed a couple of factors that may have contributed to the composition of the Student Focus Group; however why were the other Focus Groups comprised of predominantly female participants? Does the answer rest with the way that women interact with each other? Does the answer lie within the traditional nurturing role that women have held? This research does not attempt to answer these questions. They are, instead, interesting issues to be considered in another research process.

A Deeper Understanding of the Teaching Experience

> *Everything we do consciously remains for us. (Gurdjieff and Ouspinsky as cited in McCarthy, 1996, p. 54)*

Reflection is one of the most necessary tasks as an educator - taking an objective and analytical look at what we do on a daily basis and considering its impact, appropriateness, and effectiveness in light of our educational philosophies (The Saskatchewan Professional Development Unit, 1993). Van Manen (1992) asserts that "pedagogy is self-reflective. ... So we must always remain reflective about the deeper meanings and consequences of the experiences of children who are touched by us" (p. 217-218). Through this reflection, I have come to a deeper understanding of myself as an educator, of the teaching experience, of what is important in relationships, and of what needs to be fostered. It helped to clarify my perceptions of what was important in building partnerships with family.

> In building relationships, there certainly is the personal element, the idea that my students need more than just subject matter. It is the attention to the individual and constantly being aware of a child's self-esteem and doing what I can to build it up. (Terri Mayne, Professional Journal)

This idea permeated my data and seems to be the underlying basis for all education. However, in examining the statement and digging deeper, it can begin to address relationships with parents.

"What is a vision? It is a compelling image of an achievable future" (Berman Fortgang, 1999, p. 133).

> This is an absolutely key statement. Whether one is a school administrator or a classroom administrator, one must develop a clear picture of "an achievable future." When I considered my "achievable future," it became clear that I wanted a positive, safe, and supportive climate for all. This 'all' includes parents as well. I encouraged a feeling of family amongst classmates. I used the language of family and talked about loyalty, dependability, and respect.

> Last, I tried to develop a sense of responsibility for my students – responsibility for their work, their possessions, for their commitments, and for their behavior. (Terri Mayne, professional journal)

In an audio presentation, Senge (1996) answers the question "How might learning organizations be organized?" In response, he explains that the current structure of most organizations, including schools revolves around the superior-subordinate interaction. His answer focuses on fundamental changes addressing the notion of relationships. Senge asserts that organizations need to amend their existing relational goal to create partnerships that promote a commonality of interest in which the partners care about the others' goals. Within this system, each partner formally or informally agrees to furnish a part of the labor and resources and, in turn, shares in some of the success of each enterprise.

> The business perspective of a 'network approach' sounds very similar to the partnership idea that I am investigating. I particularly like the language of 'relational structure,' a partnership notion married to the 'organizational structure' of networks in which individual's strengths are utilized to better the whole. (Terri Mayne, Professional Journal)

The value of this model is the use of the strengths or the unique perspective of each stakeholder (or the teacher and parent) to assist with the growth and development of the child.

Van Manen (1992) asserts that "the vocation of pedagogy, of being educationally with children, is to empower children to give active shape to their life's contingencies" (p. 3). This is called pedagogical tact. Pedagogical tact makes sense to me. So, each day and with each person I attempt to find ways to "actively stand in relationships" (p. 149). That is pedagogical tact; that is my pedagogical responsibility; that is my pedagogical accountability both as a teacher and as the

administrator of my classroom. This insight occurred because of the reflection process. Reflection proved to be the most valuable process for me, as an educator, in deepening my understanding of the teaching experience.

The Mutually Educative Element

"Parenting and teaching derive from the same fundamental experience of pedagogy: the human charge of protecting and teaching the young to live in this world and to take responsibility for themselves, for others, and for the continuance and welfare of the world" (van Manen, 1992, p. 6 - 7). Van Manen not only defines "goal" but also states explicitly that parents and teachers possess the same "goal." The findings from my research support van Manen's assertion. "Education doesn't just stop at the school doors. Education continues on at home as well" (Participant, Parent Focus Group #1). This parent expresses her view that education is not the exclusive domain of the school. It is an endeavor to be jointly undertaken by both the teacher and the parent.

"The way [the] various voices, with their differing intentions and meaning are shared and interpreted, provides an opportunity to explore meanings constructed in a collaborative context" (Orr, 1997, p. 250). Orr provides a tangible way to view the synthesizing of perspectives. Parents and teachers have "various voices, with their differing intentions." Both stakeholders approach schooling from varied backgrounds and probably differing contexts. However, the goal is to share and interpret meanings. My research findings echo Orr's observations.

> You really seem to know your students. You really seem to know one of our daughters quite well. She was in the change room ... just knowing that she is a procrastinator about time. And so it's a real problem in our house. ... I have to drag her out of bed. ... But you [Terri] seemed to realize this when my

> husband saw that you just know that this kid, she's going to be the last one to get her clothes on and she's going to be the last one out of the classroom. It confirms that you know, that you do know our kids. (Participant, Parent Focus Group #1)

This parent knows that her child is exceptionally slow in organizing her belongings. However, she is very pleased to know that I recognized this particular characteristic of her child. This knowledge was important to her.

Another parent clearly articulates the differing perspectives and differing responsibilities. She expresses that teachers and parents do have differing perspectives but can use this to their advantage by clearly communicating with each other.

> Although the teacher takes responsibility for my children during school time, I'm the one that has my child most of the time. So that teacher, in fact spends a smaller period of time of the child's life than I do. ... I think partnership, too, includes communication about what's happening in the classroom in terms of projects, expectations, due dates, and stuff because the parent is trying to help the child meet the goals. (Participant, Parent Focus Group #1)

She clearly articulates her desire to work together to support the goals that have been established for her child.

> Parents of older elementary children more frequently said that they did not have enough training to help their children in reading and math activities at home. They reported that they help their children but that they felt less confident about their help. ... Fewer parents of fifth-grade students said that the teacher worked hard to involve parents or gave them many ideas for home learning activities. (Epstein, 1986, p. 289)

These comments indicate that older students' parents need continual encouragement to be actively involved as well as the tools to adequately support the learning needs of their child. "I was so happy you included the answers in that math thing [at the Demonstration of Learning Conferences]. I just didn't know them. I guess it's been too long" (Participant, Parent Focus Group #1). This parent's

concerns about her lack of knowledge seem to be the foundation of some of the parents' hesitancy to be more involved.

Epstein's "findings suggest that, in general, teacher practices of parent involvement maximize cooperation and minimize antagonism between teachers and parents and enhance the teachers' professional standing from the parents' perspective" (Epstein, 1986, p. 290). Parents benefit from being involved in their child's education. Thus, it is imperative for teachers to encourage and perhaps to demand gently that parents be actively involved in the schooling of their children.

> The other thing that just amazed me is I have nine parents who have volunteered to come to the Outdoor School for a week. One other is a maybe. That's ten parents who have volunteered to come ... Even for the Medieval Feast I have sixty people. (Terri Mayne, Parent Interview)
> The response was just wonderful. The few people I heard from "It was so great!" And things like that. I think that if you can incorporate fun into some of that stuff. I mean, if I can come to your Medieval Feast and you feed me and we have some plays and fun, I'll come cut out your laminating (Participant, Parent Interview)

This parent points out that there is a dynamic between teachers and parents. If parents feel that they are wanted and genuinely valued by the teacher, they are more willing to become actively involved in their child's education and partner with the teacher.

Thus, parents and teachers both have something to learn from the other. Each knows the child in an exclusive way and can contribute to the other's overall familiarity with the student. However, both have to respect the other's knowledge and be encouraging and accepting of it.

The Dynamic Between the Professional and Personal Sides of Teaching

"What is a child? To see a child is to see possibility, someone in the process of becoming" (van Manen, 1992, p. 1). How can a teacher read this and not become emotionally entangled? To work closely with a group of twenty-some young people for ten months, at least five hours each day forges a close knit bond. It is this emotional entanglement that denotes the line between professional and personal. It is the signal that indicates that we have developed a relationship that surpasses a merely professional relationship. A young teacher with whom I worked was employed in a temporary contract that was approaching its termination date. One day, she came to my office and while there broke down crying. She exclaimed, "I don't know how I am ever going to leave these kids and this school!" This simple statement resonated deeply with me. I believe that effective teachers have difficulty separating the personal side and the professional sides of teaching. My research demonstrated the value of this to parents. Parents want the professional who has a well-planned curriculum and employs appropriate discipline and intervention strategies. However, parents appreciate the personal touch that Middle Years students come to see. It is at the point when we reach beyond the professional, when our students come to know us as people - who we are, what we think - that the greatest partnerships are made.

Professional means "characterized by or conforming to the technical or ethical standards of a profession" (*Webster's*, 1991, p. 938). Parents repeatedly mentioned their expectations of teachers as professionals. "You teach the kids to be assertive enough to ask for help and to be independent. [another parent interrupts] That's what I expect a teacher to do. That's my expectation of a professional" (Participants, Parent

Focus Group #1). "But my expectation for you as a teacher is to recognize that girls and boys are like this at this age and deal with it. ... I expect that if I call you regarding these issues that you will deal with them" (Participant, Parent Focus Group #1). "My expectations of a teacher are that they would have an understanding of the cultural differences. ... So that ... if you were having trouble communicating with a parent, that you would know culturally how to communicate with them" (Participant, Parent Focus Group #1). In each instance, parents have conveyed their expectations of the professional teacher.

Personal means "relating to an individual or his character, conduct, motives, or private affairs" (*Webster's*, 1991, p. 877). Parents also expressed their appreciation for my allowing their children to come to know me as a person. "I think that you share a lot of your own personal life with them. And you give a lot of your own personal experiences that I know to [my daughter] are very meaningful" (Participant, Parent Focus Group #2). "You're human. You're not 'up here' and the kids are 'down here.' And you try and show that you make mistakes and you have strengths and weaknesses like all of the kids in the class" (Participant, Parent Focus Group #2). "You're showing your vulnerability in a way, but it's a positive thing because the kids are saying we all make mistakes even Mrs. Mayne" (Participant, Parent Focus Group #1).

> That's a good thing because most teachers, or a lot of teachers wouldn't want to show that side of themselves to the students. So then it makes them feel more comfortable to be able to come to you and say 'I don't get it' or 'I screwed up. Look what I did!' (Participant, Parent Focus Group #1)

Each of these examples illustrates parents' appreciation of my showing this personal side, my "character, conduct, motives, or private affairs." In each instance, the

professional side and personal side together helped to build relationships and further partnerships. The professional side gave parents confidence in my abilities as an educator, but the personal side made me credible in the eyes of the students. This dynamic between personal and professional becomes absolutely necessary in furthering parent teacher partnerships.

Answering Research Questions

The questions that directed my investigation are - Within the Middle Years context:

1. What does it mean to partner with parents?
2. How do parents, teachers, and students experience the partner relationship?
3. What practices enhance the partner relationship?
4. What role do students play in the partner relationship?

What does it mean to partner with parents?

Griffith (1996) asserts that partnering with parents is a school level concept rather than an individual level concept. After having completed the two cycles of this data collection process, as a classroom teacher and as an individual attempting to establish and maintain partnerships, I would disagree with this statement. While he is correct in that it requires consideration and deliberate attention on a school-wide basis, partnering with parents means recognizing each family unit as an individual, coming to know that family unit and treating them as unique. Feelings of involvement are individual-level events. If they do not occur on an individual-level, that unique connection can not be made. The success of individual connections is what helped to create effective parental relationships. However, partnership "draws a

picture of two people who are on the same page. ...You both have the same best interests of the child at heart. ... So, you have the same goals for that child and the same expectations" (Participant, Parent Focus Group #2).

How do parents, teachers, and students experience the partner relationship?

i) Parents

At the outset, I viewed parents' and teachers' relationships in isolation from the child. I felt that perhaps parents and teachers could work together "on" the child; however this view first, did not take into account my basic view of education, as the child being central. Secondly, it forgot to recognize the emotion-laden relationship that parents and children have. Lastly, it did not adequately acknowledge the developmental level of the Middle Years learner.

The foundation of our current education system is reliant on being child-centered. Children have to be at the centre of everything that we as parents and educators do. Therefore, parents need to feel from teachers that their child is viewed as unique and as important and that their child's interests are at the heart of everything that is done. Next, these interactions between parents, children, and teachers create emotional bonds and therefore can not have emotions extracted from them. While it is important to have strong relationships with parents, parents feel that the most important relationship is the student and teacher relationship. If this relationship is positive, then it is more likely to produce a positive and productive parent teacher relationship (thus caring for a child's self-concept becomes a central concern). Lastly, Middle Years learners have a need to belong (George et al, 1998). They desire to be "sharing, participating, and collaborating ... with significant adults"

(p. 23). Parents want these "significant adults" to be caring and compassionate toward their children. Thus, the question to be answered is how do parents experience the parent teacher partnership relationship. My answer, based on my findings is complex, yet simple. They experience it as individuals, through their child, based upon their own value systems and perceptions.

ii) Teachers

Generally, teachers recognized that partnership relationships were necessary. However, as indicated in Epstein's work (1986), teachers approached these partnerships with some trepidation. They viewed partnerships as a necessary but often challenging and perhaps even, at times, an unwanted element of the school experience. Teachers felt that sometimes they worked in spite of parents, trying to find ways around parents. They felt that in many instances, parents were blockers to building effective relationships with students. Many times parents spoke harshly and negatively with teachers and would come into conflict with teachers over what seemed (to teachers) to be minor issues. Thus, teachers recognize the importance of establishing positive partnerships with home, however they are viewed with some inhibitions.

iii) Students

> *Although school is a place where a lot of talk goes on, it is not often student talk. (Nieto, 1996, p. 106)*

Having examined and discussed both parents' and teachers' experiences, I now feel confident in concluding that the way in which students experience the partner relationship is the critical element in establishing effective parent teacher

partnerships. My students' parents indicated that if their children were feeling positive about school, then they were far more receptive to working constructively with me or with other educators.

Much to my surprise, students embraced the idea of partnering with parents. The only proviso is that they want to be included in the process. They want to know the substance of any conversations occurring between parents and teachers if they are not included. They embrace regular communication between the home and school because parents are constantly aware of the day to day school occurrences. "Actually I like parent teacher student [conferences] a lot better than I like parent teacher because you're there. 'Cause you sit out in the hall, what's she doing, what's she saying to them. And when you're in there and you say something. ... You can always be in there and you know what's happening."

> The parent teacher conferences are really not as bad when the teacher keeps in touch with the parents. Like, like if something goes wrong, they call or like just keep them up to day and stuff like that. Usually the student does it himself, but if they don't [another student interrupts] ... Like rather than having four months of like negative stuff, then they have like a week or something. (Participants, Student Focus Group #1)

Students echoed many of the parents' comments. "I think [getting to know the teacher] has to be a combination of informal but also structured" (Participant, Student Focus Group #1). This student articulates his need to know both the personal and professional sides of the teacher. Another student discusses how important it is that the teacher knows her students. "You only tease certain people. Only people that you know understand it. [Another student interrupts] It's the effort you've made to know us. You know who you can tease and about what" (Participants, Student Focus Group #1). Students also identified the teacher's recognition of families as unique

and individual. "You have recognized my mom's philosophy [about communicating with the school] and talked with her in a way she wanted" (Participant, Student Interview). This statement by a student seems to sum up the student experience of the partnership experience. "We have trust because I know you and you know me" (Participant, Student Interview).

What practices enhance the partner relationship?

Parents mentioned a variety of communication forms that they felt enhanced the partnership experience. They discussed learning logs, telephone calls, "I Caught You Being Good" program, "The Kid of the Week" program, notes, newsletters, the agenda, and conferences as all being traditional methods for productive communication. They explained that communication does not always have to be positive, but it needs to be informative, collaborative, and on going. Parents want to know what is happening at school, whether it is good or not and they want to have a voice in determining solutions because they know their children in ways different from the ways teachers know their children.

Parents also discussed subtle things that teachers do to deter partnership relationships. They mentioned professional distancing, meaning that 'I am the teacher. You are the parent. I am thankful you volunteered, but I don't want to have anything to do with you.' They also mentioned 'surprises.' Resoundingly, parents expressed the need to be kept informed. They did not appreciate attending conferences in which on going problems about which they were not aware were being discussed.

When viewed superficially, these partnership deterrents seem to suggest negative feelings, when probed and examined on a deeper level, they indicate a basic need of parents – a need for information and feeling of connectedness. Parents want to feel connected to their children and to be kept abreast of the daily occurrences at school. They want to share in their child's successes, but they also want to be consulted when issues arise. This underlying need indicates a need for schools to re-examine the traditional methods of home-school communication.

"It is essential that schools go beyond the more traditional approaches to communication, such as conferences and open houses, to an approach that sets up a personal relationship between particular teachers and each parent" (Eccles & Harold, 1993, p. 578). Books flood the market expounding strategies to improve and to increase parent participation in the school. They deal with communication systems, school councils, curriculum supports, and information sharing just to name a few. Each has the potential for making a connection and beginning to know and understand each family's unique make-up. By making this connection, educators make the leap from the professional side of teaching to the personal. It is this personal relationship in conjunction with a sense of teacher efficacy (with regard to parent involvement) that will make a successful partnership.

My research findings indicate that regular communication (two-way) forms the backbone of a good relationship. Parents want to know on a daily basis what is happening at school. The parents of my students were particularly pleased with the use of the daily agenda. They felt that it positively facilitates communication and mutual goal setting. "I was taking the time to read these writings [goal-setting in the

agenda.] ... Finally, I wrote in there, 'Okay, you've [her daughter] had this goal for long enough.' And so I wrote it back and [my daughter] said to me, 'Mom. Mrs. Mayne told me to tell you that she really liked your note" (Participant, Focus Group Meeting #1). As well, parents felt that both telephone and in-person conferences were important. Parents appreciated the opportunity to attend school functions that were purely social. The success of the Medieval Feast was of particular note. Parents appreciated coming to know the teacher in informal environments. Basketball games and outdoor school experiences were of particular note. As well, the parent Focus Group commented that holding Focus Group meetings in my home was a particularly effective strategy.

Ron Brandt (1998) believes that "authenticity is what parents and community want. ... Parents at all socioeconomic levels complained about teachers and principals being 'patronizing' and 'talking down to us.' They liked those with a 'personal touch.' They wanted educators just to be real" (p. 29-30). I believe that Ron Brandt's comments encapsulate the intent of parents. They appreciated a multitude of opportunities to see their child in action. However, they truly appreciated having opportunities to familiarize themselves with me.

As a parent, I can understand this perspective. My daughter is about to enter Kindergarten. For her, she waits in eager anticipation. For me, I wait in dread. It will be the first time in her life that she will have an adult besides her father or myself, directing what she learns and helping to shape, in part, who she becomes. I know that I will want to get to know her teacher well. Partly, it will be to ensure that she and I are working together to assist Juliana in becoming the best person she can be.

However, in part, it will be to see the kind of person she is as a teacher. It will be to examine her as a person and to understand her value system, the one that is being unconsciously transmitted to my daughter. It is a frightening experience to think that a person other than a family member can potentially exert the kind of influence over my daughter that her Kindergarten teacher will be able to.

> The more authentic you become, the more genuine in your expression, particularly regarding personal experiences and even self-doubts, the more people can relate to your expression and the safer it makes them feel to express themselves. That expression in turn feeds back on the other person's spirit, and genuine creative empathy takes place, producing new insights and learnings and a sense of excitement and adventure that keeps the process going. (Covey, 1990, p. 267)

Thus, my findings demonstrate that parent teacher relationships conducted with realness and openness seem to maximize effectiveness.

What role do students play in the partner relationship?

"No vocation endures like Motherhood. Mothers instill values, encourage the spirit, and feed the soul. The feelings Mothers harbor – love, anxiousness, sorrow, joy – are as intense whether cuddling newborns, worrying about teenagers or watching adult children from afar" (Douglas, 1993, introduction). The strong bond that exists between parents and children is often forgotten amidst the daily interactions in school between teachers and students. However, children are truly the ambassadors, serving as the important link, between the home and school. Again, I hearken back to my own experience with my daughter's entering Kindergarten.

"Creating caring classrooms and supportive schools ... where people respect [students] and care about them as individuals" (Freiberg, 1996, p. 36) is a primary concern of most teachers. However, the value of considering students as being

integrally tied to the relationship between parents and teachers is often overlooked. Yet, when speaking with students, it is of utmost concern to them. Ultimately, children want and need us to partner in their lives. They want strong relationships with their teachers and they want strong relationships with their parents. It is, therefore, this active participation that is required in all relationships.

> Partnerships need students. Each school shows how vitally important students are to strong, comprehensive partnership programs. Not only are students responsible for such tasks as taking newsletters home and returning tear-off sheets to school, but they are the very reason for creating these partnerships. (Sanders, 1996, p. 66)

Relationships are Built 'One Moment at a Time'

Inherent in our traditional school structure is separateness or a hierarchical structure of knowledge. Teachers are perched at the top, as possessors of knowledge looking down and disseminating their knowledge unto the fortunate students. This type of systemic structure is not conducive to fostering positive relationships between stakeholders. Thus, we, as educators, must re-examine our role and the way in which we interact with stakeholders. This examination happens naturally when a teacher recognizes that as students move through school, they must increasingly accept responsibility for their own learning. Teachers must structure learning situations to encourage and facilitate the transfer of learning responsibility.

A chance meeting prior to a basketball game. A grocery store encounter. Passing in the hallway. Each represents ordinary moments of time in our lives. Yet, each holds the potential to be a relationship-building moment. The few snippets of casual conversation exchanged in the final moments of a game or in the line-up at the grocery store or outside of the classroom present opportunities for real and authentic

dialogue between parents and teachers. The few words exchanged during these informal times help to breakdown the systemic barriers and begin to allow us to know and to better understand each other. These moments allow us insight into the other's everyday reality and allow us to have a glimpse of what constitutes the other's reality. The old adage 'you never truly know another human being until you have walked a mile in his shoes' becomes particularly pertinent. These momentary glimpses allow for empathy and a true understanding. These are relationship-building opportunities and they do occur 'one moment at a time.'

The Evolution of My Thinking

"Creating a profession of teaching in which teachers have the opportunity for continual learning is the likeliest way to inspire greater achievement for children, especially those for whom education is the only pathway to survival and success" (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 11). Recently, School Improvement has been a major focus of Regina Public Schools. Its intent is to ensure that schools are continually examining and assessing the effectiveness of their delivery system. Schools are encouraged to examine what they are currently doing and then to develop a describable change strategy. They plan and gradually build consensus for the plan amongst the stakeholders. They receive whatever outside supports are necessary and work collaboratively in implementing the change strategy. Through all of this process, schools continually engage in reflection, assessment, and revision (Fullan with Steigelbauer, 1991, Fullan, 1992). Partly, this School Improvement Movement has arisen because of the increasing public demand for outward accountability.

However, it has also arisen out of a need to create an ethos – "a way of being where the learning is suffused through the teachers' working lives" (Renyi, 1998, p. 70).

My research process did not directly form a part of the School Improvement Process. However, it did comprise my own professional development or my own 'Personal Improvement Process.' It was an attempt to examine my own practices, my ways of thinking, and in the process, my own value system to try to make them as relevant and responsive as possible. As well, I was attempting to address my own professional accountability by examining what I do and ensuring its continual evolution to meet the changing needs of my community. Authenticity, empathy, the dialectic between the personal and professional sides of teaching, and self-esteem of the learner are the issues that characterize this study. How have they impacted on my thinking and what I value in education?

My Educational Philosophy

In order to have the most effective three way educational environment, all the stakeholders need an active role. Provincial educational goals declare that in each classroom, students must be engaged in active, student-centered activities requiring critical thinking, situational analysis of events, and decision making. These same goals stress that teachers can only meet student goals when they become facilitators as opposed to lecturers or instructors. This means that teacher facilitators must automatically share classroom planning and decision-making with student learners and their parents. I embrace this challenge.

Further, I believe that one of my fundamental roles continues to be helping to build each child's self-concept. By doing this, I create a closer working relationship

and an atmosphere of trust. Partly, I accomplish this by developing a personal relationship with my students by understanding and respecting their feelings, what motivates them, what they like and dislike. As well, by consistently maintaining high expectations and by assisting students in reaching them, I help to build confidence in their own abilities.

Schooling involves three primary stakeholders - students, parents, and teachers. Each must be reasonably represented in the process. This relationship of stakeholders is often portrayed as a triangle indicating a sense of equality amongst partners. However, when examined in more depth, it becomes evident that relational equality is not only nonexistent but also unrealistic. Each student, parent, and teacher triad in an average sized classroom brings different experiences to the educational relationship. In most circumstances, each educational partner is at a different rung on the change ladder and brings different motivations to climbing the ladder. Each classroom triad is a complex changing growth environment. To say an equal relationship must exist between the three is naïve. To say that the partners, each with specific responsibilities, must articulate student educational growth goals is appropriate.

I, therefore, believe that developing a close working relationship with parents is important. Parents must feel that I have their child's interests in mind when making any decisions. This relationship must be consciously cultivated by encouraging an atmosphere of trust and respect.

I believe that my challenge, as an educator, is to identify students' individual strengths and weaknesses and to structure an appropriate educational program to meet

the individual's needs. Deficit areas must be addressed whether in accordance with the curriculum or not. Areas of strength must likewise be cultivated. In addition, students must see life as a series of choices and consequences. They are responsible for what they do. Students are a product of their choices. Therefore, they must be taught how to evaluate the consequences of the choices that they make. In doing so, they begin to see how they do have some control over their lives.

I believe in an integrated approach to learning. Children should be taught holistically because the real world is not segmented. Students should be encouraged to see the natural connections between the subject areas and their relation to "real-life."

I love my job and therefore spend a lot of time planning and preparing for it. My daybook is always written in because thorough planning is a key to successful instruction. As well, use of the curriculum guides, which are excellent, is an integral part of the planning process, however, I am not a slave to the curriculum. I believe that I must assess the skills that students possess and plan what they need whether or not it fits in with the curriculum.

An Evolution of My Values in Education

'Beliefs' and 'values' are used interchangeably because values are a natural extension of beliefs. A belief is "a conviction of truth of some statement or the reality of some being or phenomenon specially when based on examination of evidence" (Webster's, 1991, p. 142). A value is "something intrinsically valuable or desirable" (p. 1303). Thus, we have a belief because it holds true when examined; however, it becomes a value when it is regarded as something desirable or something to be

nurtured. I believe this to be true of my educational philosophy. Because of an examination of evidence (my family, my exposure to literature, and my experience), I have developed beliefs about education. However, they become values because I regard each of them as desirable and something to be nurtured.

My belief system did not undergo a radical change or paradigm shift due to the research process. Rather, what I experienced was a corroboration of facts to substantiate my existing beliefs. Prior to the research process, my belief system was a synthesis of personal values, literature findings, and instinct. I grew up in a home that placed a high value on the development of personal belief systems. I was taught to question and be an independent decision-maker. Thus, the personal value system I developed was the melding of the values central to my parents and of those that I had acquired as I grew. During my teacher education courses, I was exposed to a variety of educational theories, from which I took what best matched my own personality. Then, as I was involved in a variety of educational experiences (both as a learner and as an instructor), I developed instincts about 'what was right.' Once in my own classroom, I was able to put my belief system into practice through the environment and activities that I structured. Over the years, it evolved as I gained experience and what emerged was my value system because as I grew older I learned what beliefs I viewed as desirable and wanted to nurture.

This research process simply gave me outside confirmation of what I have come to value. 1) All the stakeholders need an active role (parents, students, and educators). 2) Each child's self-concept can be cared for by creating a closer working relationship and an atmosphere of trust, by developing a personal relationship with

students, and by consistently maintaining high expectations and assisting students in reaching them. 3) Developing a close working relationship with parents is important. 4) I must identify students' individual strengths and weaknesses and structure an appropriate educational program to meet the individual's needs. 5) I believe in an integrated approach to learning. 6) I have a high degree of commitment to my work and, therefore, carefully and deliberately plan and prepare for it. These values echo those of my participants, thus confirming the validity of my own. The challenge then becomes to ensure that my practice reflects this value system.

CHAPTER SIX

PRACTICING TEACHING DIFFERENTLY

> *Unless you do something beyond what you have already mastered, you will never grow. (Emerson as cited in Saskatchewan Instructional Development and Research Unit, 1993, p. 18)*

I believe that before I began the research project I was a good teacher. I believe that after having completed it, I am still a good teacher. Part of maintaining one's skill level is continued practice and education. The research process modified and clarified my thinking which in turn has affected my practice.

Research Issues

While in the midst of my research, I encountered some dilemmas that presented issues for myself as the researcher. First, I encountered the conflict between my roles as an educator and a researcher. The process of Action Research, which lends itself easily to the two roles, managed this conflict. As well, I encountered the issue of time management. I was forced to manage my time in such a way that I was able to handle the workload of a full-time teacher and at the same time balance the needs of a researcher.

My Role as Classroom Teacher and as Researcher

> Engagement in research ... may place classroom teachers in roles they had not anticipated, and that may conflict with their roles as teacher. ... Research, as opposed to practice, is undertaken primarily for the purpose of discovery. Thus, when one does research, one takes on a role that is different from that when one practices. (Hammack, 1997, p. 248-249)

Initially, this duality of roles (Hammack, 1997) presented some concerns in my mind. It is terribly difficult to extract myself from the emotional involvement that is so crucial to successful relationships with Middle Years students and with their parents.

Yet, as a researcher, I needed to maintain a degree of objectivity to be capable of objectively examining data and of attempting to discern an understanding of this data. How would I balance the two needs – first to ensure that the needs of my students were always my utmost concern and second to gather as much relevant data as possible?

As part of my continued professional growth, I strive to examine my own philosophical stance and its application to my yearly changing classroom environment. Each year, I reflect upon my strengths and weaknesses of the previous year and determine target areas for growth. Within each target area, I determine a set of objectives and an action plan for their accomplishment. In tangibly articulating these professional goals, a Professional Growth Plan is determined. As the year progresses, I take time to examine my Professional Growth Plan and make any necessary additions or revisions. This process is part of my regular, ongoing professional growth.

> The dividing line that is suggested here is provided by the answer to the following question: Would the activities undertaken for the research have been carried out anyway, even if no research outcomes ... were sought? Researching what one does anyway emphasizes the anyway – that is, the teaching, not the research. In this way, potential conflicts between teaching and research will be reduced. (Hammack, 1997, p. 258)

Taking on this research project seemed to address my own professional goals as well as to meet my needs as a researcher. I could investigate parent teacher partnerships and, at the same time, help to improve my teaching. In this way, I feel that I successfully managed the potential conflict between my role as a classroom teacher and my role as researcher.

Time Constraints

The issue of time constraints became of particular concern to me at various points within the data collection process. My school life was busy, first as a full-time classroom teacher with 29 students and second through my extra-curricular involvements, having at least one extra-curricular activity running at all points throughout the year. As well, I served on in-school and out-of-school professional committees requiring meetings each week. Finally, my application for an administrative appointment was a lengthy and time-consuming process. Thus, collecting data and accurately documenting my professional growth throughout this process proved to be a challenge in time management. Home and family responsibilities, particularly maintaining a strong relationship with my four-year-old daughter, also became a challenge.

My first cycle's data collection was completed just as Term II progress reports were being prepared. However, in response to some initial findings, my conference format was restructured from three-way conferences as used at the end of Term I to Demonstration of Learning Conferences. This modification proved to be effective in delivering the information that parents wanted and that students wanted to give.

The second point at which time became a major issue was in finalizing Cycle Two's data collection. It occurred in June, one of the busiest months for teachers. This year in particular, was busy. I was appointed a vice-principal meaning that I would be transferring schools and would need to move my classroom belongings by the end of June. As well, my class was finalizing preparations for our year end trip to Cypress Hills for a three night, four day Outdoor Educational experience. This trip

culminated nine months of planning and preparation on both my part and on the part of my students and their parents. Lastly, teaching Grade 7 and 8, my Grade 8 students would be involved in Farewell Activities. Thus, the end of June was an exceptionally busy time.

The timing of holding my final Parent Focus Group Meeting created some stress. Initially, it was difficult to envision 'fitting it in.' A positive effect of this time period was that I held my Final Parent Focus Group meeting in my backyard one evening at the beginning of June. It was a lovely early summer evening and participants brought their children. My daughter was present, as well, and hosted the other children. It was a very positive and relaxing evening. All participants (including myself) repeated this comment throughout the evening.

It became obvious to me that through the process of time management, all the demands on my time were met. Efficiency, prioritization, adaptation, hard work, and quality performance marked my year's end.

Action Research as Professional Development

> *Within the world we find two dimensions ... reflection and action ... if one is sacrificed even in part the other immediately suffers. (Paulo Friere as cited in McCarthy, 1996, p. 44)*

"High-quality professional development is not a program or an activity, but an ethos – a way of being where the learning is suffused through the teachers' working lives" (Renyi, 1998, p. 70). In 1991, Saskatchewan Education identified the foundations for establishing instructional effectiveness in the light of Saskatchewan's new Core Curriculum. Foundation One states that "effective instruction can be defined and described. Instructional practice, then, can be improved through professional development programs that encourage teachers to be reflective

practitioners" (Saskatchewan Education, 1991, p. 2). With this statement, Saskatchewan Education entrenched Professional Development firmly within the foundations of instructional effectiveness.

This provincial directive helps to demonstrate the validity of the Action Research approach as a real and authentic means of on going professional development for educators. Carr and Kemmis (1986) suggest that the three distinctive features of professions are 1) professions' practices are based upon research; 2) professions' members demonstrate a commitment to those served; and 3) members of the profession make their own decisions. First, they propose that teaching is a profession because it includes each of the three features. Second and more importantly, however, Carr and Kemmis offer that Action Research "presents criteria for the evaluation of practice in relation to communication, decision-making and the work of education" (p. 221). It is "a uniquely educational task ... an educational process" (p. 221). Further, they suggest that "it thus poses the challenge to teachers that they organize the educational process in their own classrooms on the same basis as their own professional development through critical self-reflection" (p. 221). Carr's and Kemmis' underlying belief is that Professional Development and the Action Research process can and should go hand in hand. They are complementary processes that are natural extensions of each other. Whether professional development is the impetus or the outcome, the end result is the same - teachers as life-long learners. The Action Research process, therefore, became an authentic means of professional development for me. It created an "ethos – a way of being where the learning is suffused through [my working life]." It began as a year of

direct research that has evolved into a way of being, a constant state of reflection and self-examination.

"The key transition [from theory to practice] is from ignorance to knowledge and from habit to reflection about what one is doing when one is educating" (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 215). Truly, we do not internalize what we have learned until we are able to put it into practice. While I may have many insights and new understandings because of my research, until I am able to make the transfer to the practical level, these discoveries constitute 'ignorance.' The process of Action Research has informed both my thinking and my practice. First, it has caused me to re-examine what I value in educational relationships and re-evaluate these value systems. As well, it has caused an examination of practice in a thoughtful and reflective manner and the consideration of why I think and behave as I do.

The Evolution of My Practice

> We are interested in pedagogic competence because we realize that it is not enough ... to accept a job as a teacher and to lecture about history or science. We also have to be able to help the child grow up and give shape to life by learning what is worthwhile knowing and becoming. (van Manen, 1990, p. 158)

The Action Research process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation has had a profound impact on my practice in a multitude of ways. First, the growth that I have seen in myself as a reflective educator has been phenomenal. Second, the research process has caused me to re-examine my current practices and to change some. Finally, it has had a corollary benefit to my students, serving as an example to my students, of a lifelong learner.

Growth as Reflective Educator

One of the aspects of the thesis that I found the most valuable was the process of journalling and the process of reflecting on the experiences within my research.

> The ordinary experiences of our teaching days are the essence of our practice. ... The life force of teaching is thinking and wondering. We carry home those moments of the day that touch us, and we question decisions made. During these times of reflection, we realize when something needs to change. (Hole & McEntee, 1999, p. 34)

Perhaps, we can rejoice in the moments when we realize that we successfully reached a child.

Over the last year, I have kept a diary and have spent time thinking about and reflecting on my days and practices. I have spent time rejoicing successes.

> The resounding message ... was how supportive parents are of the camp endeavor and how much they support my efforts. It is quite a synergetic process. I'm excited. The kids are excited. They communicate their excitement to me. I get more excited. They communicate this excitement to their parents who communicate it to me and so we feed off the enthusiasm of all involved.

This passage was nice to look back over and savor in the more difficult and challenging times of my teaching when I am feeling less successful. I know that, at this moment, students and parents were responding to what I was presenting to them.

I spent time examining my practices to ensure that they were meeting my community's needs.

> At the Term I conference, the twins' mother communicated her concerns at the amount of homework. She explained that the amount of homework that her kids had was taking them about fifteen hours on the weekend to complete. I found this number to be highly exaggerated, however, I felt it was not a point worth arguing. I listened to the parent's concerns and promised to monitor it. I realize that it is important to select one's battles carefully. If I had tried to argue with this mother, she would have dug in her heels and perhaps our relationship would have been damaged. But by deciding to monitor it, I made a change in my practice. I now ensure that my expectations

> are made absolutely clear because perhaps the girls are uncertain about my expectations, perhaps they think that I expect more than I do.

While the parent's comment was initially perceived as criticism and, at least, internally, was received negatively, over time, the process of reflection allowed me to re-examine my practices and perhaps improve some of my skills.

In May of 1999, I was appointed as a vice-principal at another elementary school. This process of journalling and reflection upon my practice that became entrenched as a habit during my research has helped to understand many of the changes occurring in my career. As I face new situations and challenges, I am able to record and consider them. In doing so, I have utilized the tools acquired during research and recontextualized them.

Early on this year in my new role, the process of reflecting through a journal became very valuable. I was faced with working with students in a more negative and disciplinarian manner. This new relationship frustrated me and caused me to reconsider my career change. I could not rationalize how I could work positively with children yet still deliver the negative messages that needed to be delivered when their behavior necessitated it. However, after having recorded events and having spent time examining their meaning and significance to me as a professional, I had a couple of insights. First, many of my feelings of frustration and of questioning the role change could be associated with the newness of the administrative position and of my uncertainty and lack of confidence associated with it. Second, the process of journalling and reflecting upon these educational experiences allowed me to objectify them and to examine them in a more separate manner. This 'objectivity' enabled role

clarification and a renewed confidence. However, it brought into question the alignment of some of my values and their practice.

A Shift in Instructional Practice

Smits (1997) reminds us that "the space of human understanding is *within* the lived world of practice and human relationships" (p. 293). My new understandings brought about the shift in my 'lived world of practice.' The first shift occurred within the research. It came when I came to recognize that the way in which conferences were facilitated with families fell short of meeting all of their needs. I believed that Middle Years students had a need for independence and a need for control over their own learning. Three-way conferences did not provide the optimum milieu for students. Thus, I shifted to the Demonstration of Learning Conference format that allowed students more autonomy over the conference.

As I finished my formal research and began the process of reflection and analysis, I examined my thinking regarding discipline and behavior management with students. There seemed to be a discrepancy between my beliefs and my practice. I believed in the need for students to play an active role in their education. I believed that each child's self-concept must be cared for by creating a closer working relationship and an atmosphere of trust, by developing a personal relationship with students, and by consistently maintaining high expectations and assisting students in reaching them. I believed that I needed to identify students' individual strengths and weaknesses and to structure an appropriate educational program to meet the individual's needs. However, the discipline philosophy that I used was simply the imposition of consequences, totally void of student input. Students would be sent to

my office for a given infraction. I would listen to their story, then consider 'what had really happened,' and finally impose judgement. This discipline philosophy did not jive with my value system.

I re-examined how my value system of allowing students to make choices and of encouraging them to accept self-responsibility came into conflict with how I practiced discipline. I could see that a new approach was needed. This incongruency gave me the impetus to take workshops in "Resolving Conflicts Constructively." The strategies employed focus on student choice, self-management, and the acceptance of self-responsibility. Ultimately it led to an examination of William Glasser's Control Theory (1984). However, a paradigmatical stance was not what I needed. I needed its implementation.

It was at that point that I encountered the work of Diane Gossen and her views on Restitution.

> Restitution provides the teacher with a process to redirect the individual. In the restitution model, the teacher's actions do not diminish the individual. Rather, the teacher uses restitution as a tool to gain control without sacrificing the self-esteem of the individual. When students understand that the goal of discipline is to strengthen them and to teach them, they will no longer be afraid to face their mistakes. They will begin to view a problem as an opportunity for learning a better way. (Gossen, 1998, p. xiii)

As I began to read and to learn about this discipline model, it seemed to fit better with my value system. Students were actively involved and had their self-esteem cared for. They were responsible for decision making and each restitution was tailored to the individuals involved, therefore, recognizing the unique needs of each student.

Thus, the process of Action Research created not only an awareness of my values, but also an examination of my practices, recognition of the incongruency between my values and my practice, and a change in my practice.

Practicing What I Preach

So often as teachers, we approach our students with platitudes stating "do this" or "don't do that." However, students seldom see us in that role. How often do we discuss the writing process with our students, yet they fail to see us as writers? How often do we have daily struggles with other individuals, yet they fail to see us constructively resolve these issues? As a teacher, I regularly share personal stories and anecdotes about my life outside of school. I believed that my students regarded these moments as an opportunity to diverge from the lesson plan and to 'get out of work.' However, I was quite shocked at my students' reactions when I began to share stories with my students about the university classes comprising my masters program and the process of completing my thesis.

On one of the first occasions that I shared about my progress and frustration associated with the lack of it, one of my quietest little girls opened up in front of the class and began to share her story about her mom's similar experiences. Another student described her father's frustrations about a Community College night course he was taking. My one little moment of openness with my students allowed a public forum for students to empathize with me. The amazing thing was that this scene repeated itself over and over that year.

"[Stallworth (1998) builds] learning activities into [her] professional life so [she] can have more experiences to share with [her] students. [She is] trying to model

for [her] students that teaching is also a learning process" (p. 77). My thesis process also allowed students to see me as a learner and gave them insight into the fact that I might actually be able to understand their perspective as learners, who experience moments of success and also moments of frustration and failure. I remember sharing with my students my frustration over having to revise my proposal so many times that I thought that I would scream. I sat there one day at school toward the end of November after having submitted my proposal for about the third time, not actually believing that it was ever going to be accepted. My sole purpose in sharing this story was simply to tell a story and probably vent to a captivated (or trapped) audience. Students began to open and empathize with me as a learner. One student shared that my experiences were similar to those that he was feeling. He said that it just did not make sense to him why we had to do all of this stupid 'self-evaluation.' He explained the frustration that he felt when he was asked over and over to look at what he was doing and to reflect upon its quality. This open expression allowed my class to have a frank discussion. It was a truly authentic moment. It allowed for students to see me as a real person. However, I also gained insight into my students' feelings regarding many of our activities.

This thesis process also provided the opportunity for transfer to my classroom and the appearance of teachable moments. This was particularly true when I discussed the Writing Process with my students. Over the last several years, the Regina Public School Division No. 4 has been completing an examination of how the teaching of writing occurs within the school division. One conclusion from this examination is that students need more work in the area of revision. Trying to follow

the direction provided to teachers by Central Office staff, I was discussing revision with my students. We had completed a particular writing assignment and I was presenting a strategy for students on how to revise their work. One student was openly resistant exclaiming that if he had wanted it written a different way, he would have done it that way in the first place.

This opening provided an excellent opportunity for me to share with my class some of my personal struggles with revision during the writing of my thesis. At that point, I shared the numerous revisions that I had made to my Ethics Approval Application. I described the process that I had been through and shared with them a couple of the drafts that I had written. It was a tangible way that I was able to share with them as an educator how my practice had changed because of writing the thesis. It also showed students that learning does not end when school ends. It is an on going process of self-improvement.

The teacher as a learner is a powerful image for students. Action Research facilitated this portrayal. Students were able to see me critically examining, reflecting, and modifying my practices. They saw me questioning, reviewing current literature, and trying to improve my own skills as an educator. During silent reading time, I would pull out some of my personal reading. They would see me record information into my reading log. During writing time, I would pull out something that I was working on and would revise or edit it. During sharing times, I would discuss the revisions that I had made. Students began to see me as a learner, not just as their teacher. As well, students could see that learning was a continual process rather than a terminal event.

Thus, the Action Research process had a far wider impact on me as an educator than simply gathering a bit of data and reflecting upon its meaning.

> In teachers' action research, there is no separation between stages of knowledge construction (reflection) and testing (action). ... The results of reflection are continuously transformed into practice, and practice continuously throws up reasons for reflection and development of these practical theories. ... Through constant movement between action and reflection ... weaknesses in practical theories are gradually detected and useful action strategies are explored and extended. Through reflexivity, the reflective practitioner's action gains quality and the research process is rigorously tested. (Altrichter et al., 1993, p. 208)

Action Research: The Never-Ending Story

Perhaps one of the greatest discoveries that I made in this research is that, even though the official research project is over, it never truly ends. My primary insight derived from this research is the importance of relationships. Relationships form the basis for all that we do and must be nurtured and developed. The value that I place on every human interaction each day has been so profoundly affected. Each time I work with student or a parent, I question whether my actions helped the relationship or hurt it. When a parent calls feeling upset over an incident at school, I always ask myself 'how can I preserve this relationship?' In most instances, there is an answer. Sometimes, the answer is that this relationship is not worth preserving. This insight brings to the forefront the question of with whom exactly should we be partnering. In the traditional family model, partnerships were assumed to occur with one or both parents. However, in our present society, with the changing structure of the family, a traditional family is a misnomer. Single parent families, adoptive families, joint-custody families, extended families are all realistic structures of family units. To assume that partnerships occur with the biological parents is a faulty

assumption. We, as educators, need to re-align our conceptual framework of family to incorporate the many family units.

The Implications of this Research for a Community School: Community Partnerships

Over the last several months, my teaching assignment has changed to a school significantly different from my study site. My current school is designated a Community School by the Department of Education. The purpose of the Community School designation is an attempt to respond positively with both economic and structural supports to school populations with a high First Nations population and who live in poverty.

> Community Schools recognize that the difficulties children experience in school are often the result of circumstances that originate in the home or the community. Their programs take into account the cultural and socio-economic life experiences of the students and provide the wide range of supports needed for children to learn. (Saskatchewan Education, 1996, p. 4)

My current school receives extra staff support, with the addition of three full-time and one half time Teacher Associates, and a full-time Community Coordinator. The addition of teacher associates provides a visible positive cultural role model for our First Nations students. Teacher Associates participate in classroom activities providing extra support and assistance for students at-risk. As well, they participate in and plan extra-curricular activities. The Community Coordinator's role is more comprehensive including administrative duties, educational programming, school and community services, and professional growth and development activities.

The Community School vision is founded upon four guiding principles – 1) a comprehensive best practices framework, 2) partnerships, shared ownership, and

community development, 3) integrated services, and 4) strengthened accountability (Saskatchewan Education, 1996). They

> are centres of learning and hope for their communities. They ... are effective in addressing the challenges of the communities they serve. As hubs for a network of community organizations and activities, they use collaborative approaches to foster the development and well-being of the entire community. (p. 6)

Many of our families receive Social Assistance, are unemployed, or work at minimum wage jobs. To assist the community, our school offers a daily nutrition program in an attempt to help students cope with their hunger. As well, our Family Room offers a clothing depot where students or community members may receive needed clothing at no cost. A Family Room is an example of an Integrated School-Linked Services Program (Saskatchewan Education, 1996) in which the Public School System provides the physical space and the Department of Social Services provides the Social Worker. In addition to the extra staff, our school receives additional funding to enable us to support programs that would address needs within our community and to provide the various needed supports.

Our school provides Grade 1 to Grade 8 with two-half day Kindergarten classes and a half-day Pre-Kindergarten program all with a fluctuating enrollment of 360 students. The school has a 10% monthly turn over rate. That is, each month 10% of our overall population transfers out and an additional 10% of students transfer in. Within one school year, one family may leave the school and then return at least once. Many of our families are single parent families or two parent families with both parents working. As well, many of our family units do not necessarily include a biological parent. Often, children are raised by grandparents (usually grandmothers),

aunts, uncles or are in foster care. It is a school vastly different from my research site, therefore, presenting many different issues and challenges that need to be sensitively addressed.

My Evolving Role as an Administrator

As an administrator in this school, I am charged with interacting with families, rather than simply with parents on both a classroom level as well as a school-wide level. The traditional model of home-school communication between parents and the school is moot. At my school, we work with families, in whatever manner those families may be comprised. How can I use my insights from my research and apply them to my new situation?

First, I know that I must build relationships with children. My research demonstrated that children are the ambassadors of the school and it is their attitude that may affect the home-school relationship. Therefore, each child's self-concept must be cared for by creating an atmosphere of trust, by developing a personal relationship with students, and by consistently maintaining high expectations and assisting students in reaching them. Next, my findings indicated that families must be approached with honesty and genuineness and that a good working relationship with them must be fostered. This assumes that all the stakeholders need to play an active role. Finally, I must recognize each student and family as an individual and unique unit and identify students' individual strengths and weaknesses and to structure an appropriate educational program to meet the individual's needs.

This research process has heightened my awareness as an educator to the on going need to assess and re-assess in order to maintain our high degree of

professionalism. With the movement towards increased public accountability, we must continually examine our educational structures and practices to ensure that they are meeting the needs of the stakeholders.

Leading by Example

In our society, the time of two-parent families, with a stay-at-home mom is no longer everyone's reality. Each family unit is unique. With an increasing variety of family unit structures, our strategies, as educators, for interacting with them, become as varied as their number. Therefore, how can we begin to define partnership and determine how to implement it?

The principal with whom I work is the embodiment of the ideals of partnership. She knows the families in our community well. She knows them by name. When working with any family, she can provide significant background information that will assist in working effectively with the family. How does she do this? Families have come to trust her over the years. She works with them honestly, but fairly and justly. This has instilled confidence in the families who, in many cases, do not have much confidence in public institutions. They, in turn, are willing to work and share with her. She is a real asset to our school. My principal leads by example. She telephones parents regularly, catches them in the hall, sends notes, and does whatever she needs in order to have a relationship with families.

There is no yellow brick road that lays out the pathway to the desired end, that of partnership. There are, simply, guidelines that must be tailored to each unique situation to guide the voyager through the undefined path. Partnership is not a given

in every situation. It should, however, be the ideal, the end to which we continually strive.

> I think the term [partnership] maybe implies some things that...are not going to be possible in every case. When I get looking at the classroom and the relationship that I have with the different families in the classroom, there are some who I would say 'oh yeah, for sure I partner with them' because I think ... we are on the same page. ... But there are some parents for whom I don't think that's true. Maybe they have other expectations for their children or contrary expectations or none. ... Maybe if you talk about developing partners, forming partners, and striving to reach that in every instance. (Terri Mayne, Parent Focus Group Meeting #2)

This quest has truly been a process of interpretive inquiry and human science research (van Manen, 1990).

> There is no systematic argument, no sequence of propositions that we must follow in order to arrive at a conclusion ... human science bids to recover reflectively the grounds which, in a deep sense, provide for the possibility of our pedagogic concerns with children (p. 173).

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Appendices

Appendix A:

Contents: Approval Documents

Ethics Approval
Consent Forms
School Board Approval

UNIVERSITY OF REGINA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH MEMORANDUM

DATE: December 1, 1998

TO: Teresita Mayne
2663 Wallace Street
Regina, SK
S4N 4B7

FROM: G.W. Maslany, Chair
Research Ethics Review Committee

Re: Understanding and Improving the Quality of Parent Teacher Partnerships in a Middle Years Classroom

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Please be advised that the committee has considered this proposal and has agreed that it is:

__X__ 1. Acceptable as submitted.
(Note: Only those applications designated in this way have ethical approval for the research on which they are based to proceed.)

_____ 2. Acceptable subject to the following changes and precautions (see attached):
Note: These changes must be resubmitted to the Committee and deemed acceptable by it prior to the initiation of the research. Once the changes are regarded as acceptable a new approval form will be sent out indicating it is acceptable as submitted.
Please address the concerns raised by the reviewer(s) by means of a supplementary memo.

_____ 3. Unacceptable to the Committee as submitted. Please contact the Chair for advise on whether or how the project proposal might be revised to become acceptable (ext. 4161/5186.)

G.W. Maslany

cc: D. Friesen, supervisor

GM/ab/ethics2.dot

Parent Volunteer Letter of Consent

Title of Study: The title of this study is Understanding and Improving Parent Teacher Partnerships in a Middle Years Classroom.

Investigator: My name is Terri Mayne, a graduate student at the University of Regina, working towards completing my Masters of Education degree.

Purpose of Study: Over the next six months, I will undertake a study that examines parent teacher relationships, with the intention of developing a better understanding and improving the quality of parent teacher partnerships. In this research, I hope to work with parent volunteers of this class to determine the most effective ways to involve them in their child's education. I will investigate what it means to partner with parents, how parents experience the partner relationship, and what practices enhance the partner relationship.

Role of Participants: I am asking for volunteers who would be willing to participate in small group discussions focusing on parent teacher partnerships. In addition, participants will take part in interviews.

Duration of Participation: This study will take six months (January 1999 to June 1999) to complete. I envision a commitment of three meetings and three interviews. The duration of each meeting will be approximately one hour per meeting with each of the three interviews lasting about an half an hour each as well.

Potential Risks, Discomforts, or Inconveniences: It is not expected that participants will experience any risk or discomfort completing the questionnaires. If you do, you may withdraw at any time.

Potential Benefits of This Study: The benefits of this project include an improvement in parent teacher interactions which provides direct benefits to students. By establishing a more effective working relationship with parents, teachers are able to better support student learning.

Confidentiality of Data and Withdrawal from the Study: You are guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. Your name will not be associated with your personal data. Consent Forms will be stored separately from the data. Only the Researcher and Supervisor will have access to the original data. The original information will be destroyed. Your decision to participate is voluntary, you any withdraw from the study at any time without question or penalty.

REGINA, SASKATCHEWAN, CANADA S4S 0A2 http://www.uregina.ca/educ FAX: (306) 585-4880

Information about the Study: All participants will be informed about the results of the study personally, through a scheduled debriefing, or through access to publications of the findings. Questions concerning the rights of research subjects may be addressed to the Human Subjects Ethics Committee, University of Regina and the Regina Public School Division No. 4. If participants have any questions or concerns about their rights or treatment as research participants, they may contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at 585-4461, or the Regina Public School Division No. 4, Brian Malley at 791-8220.

Consent: Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood the information provided and agree to participate. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You will be given a copy of this form.

Sincerely,

Terri Mayne

I acknowledge that I understand the information provided and agree to participate. I understand that I may withdraw from this project at any time.

Participant Name: _____

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Address: _____

Phone (W): _____

(H): _____

Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____

Terri Mayne
W - 635 Douglas Ave. E - 791-8580
H - 789-5233

Advisor Signature: _____ Date: _____

Dr. David Friesen
W - Faculty of Education - 585-4527
H - 586-8547

THE BOARD OF EDUCATION OF THE
REGINA SCHOOL DIVISION
NO. 4 OF SASKATCHEWAN

J.A. Burnett Education Centre
1600 4th Ave., Regina, Sask., S4R 8C8
Ph: (306) 791-8200
Fax: (306) 352-2898

October 21, 1998

Terri Mayne
2743 Schweitzer Dr.
Regina, SK
S4V 1C4

Dear Terri:

Please accept this letter as approval to proceed with your research, "Understanding and Improving the Quality of Parent Teacher Partnerships in the Middle Years Classroom."

I am enclosing a copy of Policy MFE of the Board of Education with respect to research. Please note in particular:

a) participation by any subject is voluntary,
b) parents of students must be informed that research is being conducted and give permission,
c) parents must be able to view the research instrument in advance if they so choose,
d) anonymity must be guaranteed,
e) a copy of your completed study must be forwarded to this office.

We look forward to seeing the results of your research. Best wishes with your continued studies.

Yours sincerely

Brian Malley
Assistant Superintendent
Curriculum and Support Services

BM/ms

c.c. Loretta Elford, Director of Education