

Book Reviews

The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn From Each Other. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. New York: Random House, 2003, 256 pages.

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Not long ago a parent sheepishly recounted to me a story about receiving a letter from her son's school. "I was so afraid of that letter that I didn't open it for three days! I was sure it was going to be another notification of how my son had misbehaved, but when I finally got the nerve to open it, I discovered it was good news about the great improvement he's made."

Being a teacher and not a parent, this was the first time in my memory that I tuned into parents' assumptions and vulnerabilities about communications with teachers. Obviously others are more attuned to the intricacies of the relationship between parents and teachers, and the topic is important enough to warrant a fully fledged book. *The Essential Conversation* is that book. Harvard professor Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot focuses on parent-teacher conference interactions and suggests that anxiety is an undercurrent for both parents and teachers. In this book, Lawrence-Lightfoot elegantly and insightfully welcomes the reader to experience schooling from both sides of the desk.

In six main chapters Lawrence-Lightfoot weaves the stories of 10 female teachers and several parents—mostly mothers—collected over two years across the United States. These narratives skillfully lead the reader into deeper understanding of parents' and teachers' experiences with each other. Although this gender bias appropriately reflects the demographics of the profession and parental involvement, in my mind it makes Lawrence-Lightfoot's conclusions somewhat tentative. This tentativeness, however, does not detract from the importance of this message to teachers and parents. Both groups must consider the story between the lines in their conversations, particularly at a time when parental involvement is increasingly promoted as a key strategy for improving student success.

Lawrence-Lightfoot excavates parents' historical and cultural narratives that consciously or unconsciously shape their values when acting on behalf of their children. Quoting Maxine Greene, Lawrence-Lightfoot emphasizes that teachers too have "layered lives" that affect how they approach and respond to parents. I found the first chapter "Ghosts in the Classroom" especially useful for its emphasis on the subtext of parent-teacher conferences; by navigating

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parents' and teachers' stories, Lawrence-Lightfoot elucidates the autobiographical pasts that are relived in parent-teacher exchanges.

Parents and teachers alike will be able to recognize the territoriality that Lawrence-Lightfoot elaborates on in Chapter 2. She suggests,

The boundary lines may refer to physical geography, to parents crossing the threshold of a classroom or to teachers making home visits. Or the lines may refer to temporal measures and limits, the frequency of encounters that feel useful and appropriate to parents and teachers.... But the terrain between families and schools is also defined by boundary lines that I would describe as both psychological and metaphoric.... These lines, those we cannot name or see, are the most difficult to anticipate and navigate. (p. 50)

Lawrence-Lightfoot devotes Chapter 3 to the singular importance of teachers breaking through this mysterious terrain by grounding student appraisals in "artifacts, anecdotes, or evidence" (p. 106) as a way to build trust with parents. Parents' basic, yet often unarticulated wish that teachers know *their* children takes form in these "truths the hand can touch" (p. 86). Teachers especially can gain insight from this chapter because they often must negotiate truth, and parents' sensitivities to it.

Lawrence-Lightfoot maintains her literary artistry in the chapters leading up to the conclusion; however, I found the content of Chapters 4 and 6 less successful in encouraging the reader to consider alternative perspectives. Her discussion of differentiated groups of parents, including "poor, black or brown ... uneducated.... white, affluent, well-educated" (p. 113) and immigrant status, reflects existing stereotypes. The relative lack of divergent voices in these categories may potentially reaffirm teachers' ideas, shutting down rather than opening up dialogue with parents. This seems contrary to the purpose of this book. In addition, the penultimate chapter "Living Both Sides" clearly establishes teachers who are also mothers as having a privileged position in dealing with parents. Rather than question the veracity of this reality, I suggest that the placement of this fact toward the end of a book that artfully portrays parents' and teachers' experiences deflates the laudable intended effect. I do, however, applaud Lawrence-Lightfoot's recommendation in the conclusion that teacher education programs consider training future teachers about "productively relating to the parents of their students" (p. 229).

Lawrence-Lightfoot's style of recapping the subjects and their stories in subsequent chapters may have a repetitive effect if read in one sitting. However, this feature lends itself to leisurely reading; concentrated, cover-to-cover reading is not necessary to appreciate this book. This adds immense practical value to time-strapped parents and professionals. Some readers may lose patience with the occasional sentimentality and repeated references to the "Black versus White" conflict; nonetheless, this book is gracefully written and affords the reader an opportunity to think about parent-teacher interactions more intelligently and compassionately. Although some academic literature presents itself as appropriate for professionals and parents alike, this book is a rare find. It actually meets the criteria of both scholarship and readership accessibility. Despite the minor shortcomings mentioned above, for parents, teachers, and administrators concerned with authentic partnerships, this book is, in a word, essential.