

PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATION IN EARLY  
CHILDHOOD: A COMPARATIVE, MIXED METHODS STUDY OF WHITE AND  
ETHNIC-RACIAL MINORITY PARENTS

by

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PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATION IN EARLY  
CHILDHOOD: A COMPARATIVE, MIXED METHODS STUDY OF WHITE AND  
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This explanatory sequential mixed methods study compared parents' and teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding (a) parent-teacher relationships and (b) parent-teacher communication according to parents' ethnicities and races. Non-matched, quantitative data about parent-teacher relationships were collected from parents (White and ethnic-racial minority) and teachers (those reporting on their relationships with either White or ethnic-racial minority parents) at two early childhood programs ( $N = 72$ ). Twenty-four participants were observed during morning and afternoon transitions (child drop-off and pick-up). Thirteen participants were then interviewed, as well as each early childhood program director. Analyses of co/variance were used to analyze the quantitative data. Qualitative data were analyzed using a three-level coding approach and domain and discourse analyses. (*Relationships*) White and ethnic-racial minority parents had relationships with teachers that were similar in perceived quality. Teachers also had similar quality relationships. Respect was essential to parents' and teachers' positive relationship experiences, though parents and teachers conceptualized respect differently. Teachers reported negative relationship experiences with ethnic-racial minority parents. (*Communication*) Teachers' perceptions of communication were similar, but ethnic-racial minority parents' perceptions were significantly higher than White parents' perceptions.

Communication experiences among parents and teachers encompassed conversation about children's daily activities, which changed with children's ages. Ethnic-racial minority parents had conversations with teachers that were shorter than those of White parents and characterized by teachers' use of nonverbal behaviors and communicative adaptations due to language barriers that teachers experienced when communicating with culturally and linguistically diverse parents. (*Integration of relationships and communication*) Parents' and teachers' feelings of trust distinguished "good" and "excellent" relationships. Parents and teachers also conceptualized trust differently, such that parents' trust encompassed care for and about children whereas teachers' trust entailed confidence in their credibility. Teachers reported difficulty in gaining trust among parents with non-U.S. cultural orientations and those who were male or older. Findings suggest that teachers (a) experience relationship and communication challenges when working with ethnically, racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse parents and (b) need additional guidance and skill development to effectively communicate and partner with ethnic-racial minority parents. Findings are applicable to early childhood education professionals including program directors, teachers, and teacher educators.

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**DEDICATION**

*For F.P., Jane, & Raymond.*

*I know that I am truly blessed because God gave me the three of you.*

PREVIEW

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Listen to the MUSTN'TS, child,

Listen to the DON'TS

Listen to the SHOULDN'TS

The IMPOSSIBLES, the WONT'S

Listen to the NEVER HAVES

Then listen close to me-

Anything can happen, child,

ANYTHING can be.<sup>1</sup>

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This is my Everest. It's my summit that I've wanted to reach for over ten years now. I've had more people in my life tell me that I *couldn't*, *wouldn't*, or *shouldn't* get my Ph.D. than those who told me that I can and will. Thank you to the people who encouraged me along the way and shared their insight and expertise with me so that I could reach my summit: To Carolyn Boles and Dr. C. Thresa Yancey, my undergraduate mentors, for taking a chance on me in the very early days of my pursuit of a doctorate.

To my former advisor, Dr. Tonia Durden, thank you for not giving up on me and validating my authentic self. You not only encouraged me to be me, you expected it. Thank you for encouraging my individual path to excellence, and thank you for your servant's heart. To my current advisor, Dr. Michelle Rupiper, thank you for molding me into the best teacher educator that I could be. It has been an honor to teach, and I am so thankful that you entrusted me with the task especially when it is so very close to your

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<sup>1</sup> "Listen to the Mustn'ts" is from *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Shel Silverstein (1974). The author of this dissertation does not hold the copyright to this material.

heart. Thank you for respecting me and investing in my personal and professional development. I appreciate all the times you encouraged and reminded me that this was possible. To these exemplary women, thank you for sharing in my journey and sharing parts of yourselves so that I could grow. Most of all, thank you for silencing my “mustn’ts.”

To my committee members, Drs. Helen Raikes, Maria de Guzman, and Jordan Soliz. Thank you for teaching me—sharing your wisdom and expertise even when you didn’t have to and when it wasn’t easy to do. Thank you for keeping a special place for me among your students and commitments and keeping me in your care during this journey. Thank you, Dr. Soliz, for giving me opportunities to collaborate with you and for mentoring me in the true spirit of teaching and learning.

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Thank you also to all of you who participated in this study. I appreciate you candidly sharing your experiences with me so that I could learn from you. Thank you to the program directors who found my study to be worthy of their time and valuable to the missions of their early childhood programs.

I once asked my mother (who is all-knowing and wise), how I can thank all of you for doing all that you’ve done. I told her that “thank you” just didn’t convey or capture the magnitude of your work and contribution, especially over these many years.



She told me, more or less, that hopefully I've said enough "thank yous" along the way.

To all of you, I hope I have done that.

Most of all, thank you to my mother, sister, and nephew. You have always supported me and my ambitions, when the rest of the world did not. We sacrificed and grew together. *This* accomplishment is *our* accomplishment. This Everest is ours—something that we climbed *together*.

Finally, my Lord and Savior is my well of strength, never ending or failing. None of these wonderful things would have happened had it not been for His divine grace and love. I weep when I think about how He used His greatness to bless me and my family, though we are the smallest of insignificant things. I am thankful that He allowed me to bend but not break and for keeping my hands busy but my heart still. "Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love" (Peace Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi).

TIVE FINDINGS: RESEARCH AIM ONE  
 TIVE FINDINGS: RESEARCH AIM TWO  
 TIVE FINDINGS: RESEARCH AIM THREE  
 ON  
 CES  
 CES  
 DIX A: INTRODUCTORY EMAIL  
 DIX B: INVITATION TO COMPLETE SURV  
 DIX C: SURVEY  
 DIX D: OBSERVATION PROTOCOL  
 DIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

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 DIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	TITLE	PAGE
3.1	Parent Population Demographics at <i>Small Steps</i>	37
3.2	Parent Population Demographics at <i>Tot Spot</i>	38
4.1	Summarized Parent and Teacher Demographic Information	55
4.2	Item Loadings onto <i>Joining</i> and <i>Communication to Other</i> Components	59
4.3	Correlations Between Demographic Variables and PTRS Total Scores among Individual Participant Groups	64
4.4	Score Means, Standard Deviations, and Alphas	66
4.5	High, Moderate, and Low Score Group Categories of Parents and Teachers	67
4.6	High, Moderate, and Low Score Group Categories of Individual Participant Groups	68
5.1	Summarized Parent and Teacher Demographic Information	76
5.2	Interview Participants	77
7.1	Summarized Results and Findings	139

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

“If we want children to thrive in child care settings, then it makes sense to intentionally build positive relationships with the adults who play the largest roles in the children's daily lives: their parents. Good communication is essential for building those relationships, but good communication doesn't just happen. As child care professionals, we must be reflective and intentional about achieving effective parent-provider relationships through good communication.”

(eXtension, 2015, n.p.)

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#### Overview

This chapter introduces the context of this study which explored parent-teacher relationships (PTRs) and parent-teacher communication (PTC) in early childhood (birth to five years) with intentional comparison of White and ethnic-racial minority parents. First, parent engagement is defined. Next, the importance of parent engagement is discussed followed by the importance of communication and standards of practice related to PTC. Then, problems concerning PTRs and communication among ethnic-racial minority parents are discussed. Following a discussion of these problems, the purpose, scope, delimitations, methodological approach, and theoretical underpinning of this study are described. A discussion of the study's research aims, questions, and utility end the chapter.

## **Parent Engagement Defined**

Parent engagement practices directly connect parents to teachers as well as to their children's schooling and learning experiences. It refers to "an ongoing process of active participation, communication, and collaboration between parents, schools, and teachers. The goal of parent engagement is to ensure child achievement and success" (Georgia Department of Education, 2015, n.p.). Though termed a variety of ways,<sup>2</sup> parents and teachers partner together during these interactions (e.g., conferences and meetings, classroom participation, and daily communications). They engage in important conversations, information-sharing, and developmental monitoring of children through a process of communicating (verbally and written) and sharing information (National Parent Teacher Association, 2009).

## **Parent Engagement and Children's Outcomes**

Parent's engagement in children's educational and learning experiences is critical to their success in academic performance, school attendance, and social-emotional skill development (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Other research has identified that parent engagement benefits children in language, self-help, social, motor, adaptive, and basic school skills (Caspe, Lopez, & Wolos, 2007) as well as pre-literacy skills (Arnold, Zeljo, Doctoroff, & Ortiz, 2008), teacher-child relationships, and child attitudes about schooling (Dearing, Kreider, & Weiss, 2008). Further, parents who maintain direct and regular contact with teachers have children who demonstrate positive engagement with peers, adults, and learning (Caspe et al., 2007; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004). Moreover, parent engagement is particularly crucial for children who are

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<sup>2</sup> Partnerships, collaboration, family engagement, and parental involvement are used interchangeably. "Parent engagement" is used in this dissertation.

ethnic-racial minorities in terms of academic achievement and social outcomes (Jeynes, 2005; Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010), especially African American and Latino children (Jeynes, 2003, 2005; Powell et al., 2010).

Though these relationships between parent engagement and child outcomes can be modulated by individual child characteristics like academic skills and gender (Hill & Craft, 2003; Jeynes, 2005), they communicate the importance of parent engagement and are nonetheless compelling. Given the importance of parents' engagement in children's educational and learning experiences, many dimensions of parent engagement have been woven into standards of developmentally appropriate practice (Snow, 2015) and endorsed by a variety of schooling and learning entities (e.g., The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network and The National Association for the Education of Young Children), particularly since the passing of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) (Sheridan & Moorman Kim, 2015).

### **The Importance of Communication**

According to Sheridan and Moorman Kim (2015), parents and teachers engage with each other in three main ways—behaviorally, cognitively, and relationally. Behavioral engagement entails behaviors like hosting and attending parent-teacher conferences. Cognitive engagement encompasses parents' and teachers' beliefs and attitudes about school and schooling. Relational engagement entails building quality relationships between parents and teachers. Though less prioritized than the other engagement dimensions, relational engagement is critical to how parents involve themselves in their child's learning and educational experiences (Sheridan & Moorman Kim, 2015). It is also thought to be the most effective way of engaging parents and

developing partnerships between parents and teachers since it emphasizes PTC and quality of PTRs (Sheridan, Moorman Kim, Coutts, Sjuts, Holmes, Ransom, & Garbacz, 2012). Currently, early childhood programs and teachers are expected to engage and involve parents in their children's educational and learning experiences in ways that are reciprocal, egalitarian, and respectful (Sheridan & Moorman Kim, 2015).

Furthermore, PTRs and communication are viewed as the key to creating and maintaining effective partnerships between parents and teachers. PTC is therefore an integral component of engagement approaches, strategies, and practices (Wong & Hughes, 2006), and it is a critical factor in PTRs (Swick, 2003). In fact, many argue that it is *the* factor in these relationships as relationships are constituted within communication (Swick, 2003). Today, early childhood programs emphasize the relational dimensions of parent engagement.

### **Standards of Practice**

Current standards and guidelines from governing early childhood entities stipulate that parents should be engaged in egalitarian relationships with teachers *through* communication that is respectful, honest, and open (Sheridan et al., 2012). Furthermore, communication should be *between* families and early childhood programs (two-way communication) rather than *from* programs and teachers *to* families (one-way communication) (Gestwicki, 2015). Several entities establish guidelines for PTRs through PTC and two-way communication. Most pertinent to early childhood, however, are principles from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2015) regarding effective parent engagement:

inviting families to participate in decision-making and goal setting for their child (Principle 1); engage in two-way communication (Principle 2); engage families in ways that are truly reciprocal (Principle 3); provide learning activities for the home and in the community (Principle 4); invite families to participate in program-level decisions and wider advocacy efforts (Principle 5); and implement a comprehensive program-level system of family engagement (Principle 6) (n.p.).

Additionally, Head Start, another early childhood education entity, outlines standards of practice regarding parent engagement. Its Relationship-Based Competencies (RBCs) (2012) stipulate that professionals should address nine elements of respectful and responsive relationships with families and children. Among them are efforts to promote reciprocal and respectful relationships with families (Competency 1) that respond appropriately to families' cultural capital (Competency 2) while connecting families with peers and the community (Competency 5).

More specifically, two-way communications are particularly recommended as they elicit communication from parents and give them explicit opportunities to communicate and connect with teachers, thereby connecting to children's educational and learning experiences. These communications emphasize and encourage a dialogue between parents and teachers (Graham-Clay, 2005). Typically, modes of two-way communication include in-person conversations, conversations over email, phone calls, home-school notebooks, classroom visits, and parent-teacher conferences (University of Illinois Extension, 2014).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Two-way communications are distinct from one-way communications in that one-way communications encompass communication in one direction, typically from programs or teachers to parents (e.g., newsletters and other mass notifications). Since they do not elicit responses from parents, they are discouraged in favor of two-way communications.



Additionally, personal modes of two-way communication, such as face-to-face (FTF) communication, best encourage rapport between parents and teachers and allow for more information-sharing (Thompson, 2008). FTF communication is also more effective in establishing a positive PTR than other modes of communication (Gestwicki, 2015; University of Illinois Extension, 2014) because it reduces the “social distance” between parents and teachers and places them as equals to one another (Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005, p. 14). Additionally, FTF communication during transition periods (i.e., child drop-off and pick-up) are the most common ways that parents communicate with teachers and engage in children’s educational and learning experiences (Gestwicki, 2015). Thus, FTF communication is the best mode of two-way communication.

However, early childhood programs observe and implement parent engagement recommendations and guidelines differently. Many programs are not NAEYC accredited and do not adhere to NAEYC Program Standards which include an explicit focus on relationships with families and parents based on mutual trust and respect (Program Standard 7; NAEYC, n.d.). Further, some early childhood programs are not recognized as part of states’ K-12 public education systems and subsequently are not required to adhere to federal standards of parent engagement, such as provisions articulated by NCLB (Department of Education [DOE], 2004) that require “regular, two-way, and meaningful communication” between schools, teachers, and parents (p. 3).

In addition, some early childhood settings are exempt from observing state or federal regulations concerning parent engagement, such as half-day programs and those operated through religious institutions (NAEYC, 1998; North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education [DCDEE], 2015). Moreover, overarching guidelines

and recommendations such as NAEYC standards or Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) standards for parent engagement are interpreted and implemented differently across states and individual early childhood programs (Barrueco, Smith, & Stephens, 2015; NAEYC, 1998). Thus, there is overwhelming variability in what standards early childhood programs observe and how they implement guiding principles of effective parent engagement, particularly among ethnic-racial minority parents.

### **The Problem at Hand**

Despite this variability, there is consensus among early childhood entities and scholars regarding the role of communication in parent engagement practices (Sheridan & Moorman Kim, 2015). However, there is growing evidence to suggest that early childhood programs have difficulty implementing successful strategies and approaches for communicating with ethnically and racially diverse parents (Haines, Summers, Turnbull, & Rutherford Turnbull, 2015). Though standards and guidelines clearly explicate that parents should be engaged in relationships with teachers as equals and through two-way communication, research overwhelmingly shows that ethnic-racial minority parents have disparate experiences in PTRs and communication as compared to White parents.

For example, ethnic-racial minority parents tend to have poor relationships and interpersonal interactions with teachers (Huang & Mason, 2008), and many parents experience disrespectful or hostile PTRs (Murray, Finigan-Carr, Jones, Copeland-Linder, Haynie, & Cheng, 2014). Ethnic-racial minority parents often have less supportive relationships with teachers as compared to White parents (Hughes & Kwok, 2007), and ethnic-racial minority parents frequently experience social exclusion (Huang & Mason,

2008). Consequently, many ethnic-racial minority parents remain disconnected from their child's learning and educational experiences (Nzinga-Johnson, Baker, & Aupperlee, 2009) and tend to be less involved in their children's educational and learning experiences than White parents (Iruka, Durden, & Kennel, 2015; Nzinga-Johnson et al., 2009).

These parents' experiences are concerning since ethnically and racially diverse children comprise a growing majority of enrollment in early childhood programs. Children who are ethnically and racially diverse represent a large portion of current early childhood enrollment (the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015a), particularly African American and Asian children (Musu-Gillette, Robinson, McFarland, KewalRamani, Zhang, & Wilkinson-Flicker, 2016). Data show that 32% of Hispanic, 39% of Black, and 20% of Asian three- to five-year-olds were enrolled in preschool programs in 2014 (NCES, 2015b). Further, children of immigrants in early childhood programs has doubled since 1990 (Fortuny, Hernandez, & Chaundry, 2010) and account for one-fourth of all American children (Child Trends, 2014a). Moreover, pre-kindergarten enrollment is projected to become populated by more diverse children than White children by 2022 (Hussar & Bailey, 2013).

Thus, parents of many ethnic and racial groups are steadily entering early childhood programs, yet they tend to have lower quality interactions and relationships with teachers compared to White parents. It is therefore critical to explore these parents' relationships and communications with their children's teachers so that (a) early childhood programs better meet standards of inclusive family engagement and (b) to

encourage ethnic-racial minority children's learning outcomes in a variety of developmental domains.

### **Purpose**

This purpose of this study was to learn about parent-teacher relationships and parent-teacher communication in early childhood, comparing parents' and teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding relationships and communication according to parents' ethnicities and races.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

While early childhood is widely recognized as the years spanning from birth to age eight (NAEYC, 2009), this study delimited its focus to examine relationships and communication of parents and teachers of children from birth to age five, prior to enrolling in kindergarten and entering formal schooling because there are few studies that examine these processes within these years (LaForett & Mendez, 2010; Smith, Robbins, Stagman, & Mathur, 2013).

This study also focused explicitly on the relational dimension of parent engagement (Sheridan & Moorman Kim, 2015)—PTRs and PTC. While the other dimensions of engagement (i.e., behavioral and cognitive) are important for children's holistic development (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009), they were not examined in the current study. Further, while parent engagement encompasses connections and collaboration between families, schools, and communities (Pope Edwards & Kutaka, 2015), parent engagement in learning contexts (schools and educational programs) is regarded as the most valuable type of engagement (Kim, 2009). Therefore, this study specifically examined parent-teacher processes. This study also

deliberately took both parents' and teachers' perspectives and experiences into account to (a) capture parents' perspectives, which have not been fully represented in the literature (Sheridan et al., 2012), and (b) render a more complete understanding of parent-teacher interpersonal dynamics by understanding parents' and teachers' points of view.

**Defining of terms.** "Parent engagement" is used throughout this dissertation.

However, this term is conceptually similar to other interchangeable terms such as parent-teacher partnerships, collaboration, and family-school engagement.<sup>4</sup> In this study, "parent" refers to parents of young children (birth to five years), and "White parent" refers to parents who self-identify as White. "Ethnic-racial minority parent" refers to parents who are Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, or Other.<sup>5</sup> Finally, "teacher" refers to the child's teacher (primary caregiver) in the early childhood program. These individuals are referred to as "teachers" rather than "childcare providers" or other similar terms because these individuals provide not only care for children, but teach them in profound ways (Whitebook & Darrah, 2013).

### **Methodological Approach**

A mixed methods approach was used to capitalize on the benefits of quantitative and qualitative approaches while also simultaneously compensating for the shortcomings in each approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Moreover, this approach was used as an exclusively quantitative or qualitative approach would provide an incomplete understanding of PTRs and communication (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). That is, a

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<sup>4</sup> Partnership, engagement, and involvement are terms most often used, with involvement being the oldest (Pope Edwards & Kutaka, 2015), and parental engagement, family engagement, and parental involvement are used interchangeably (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012).

<sup>5</sup> These ethnic-racial categories have been informed by definitions of minority groups by The Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2014).

quantitative approach would capture information about parents' and teachers' perceptions as well as differences in those perceptions, but would neglect their experiences from their own points of view. Similarly, a qualitative approach would summarize parents' and teachers' experiences, but would not be statistically supported or applicable to other parent or teacher populations. A mixed methods approach was therefore used to collect different but complementary data that construct a deep understanding of PTRs and communication when considered in relation to one another.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopted the position that relationships are constituted in communication (Swick, 2003). It also focused exclusively on the relational aspects of parent engagement (i.e., interpersonal relationships and communication) as these aspects are key in building positive connections between parents and teachers (Sheridan & Moorman Kim, 2015). Therefore, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT; Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987) was used to guide the scope and methodological approach of this study. CAT can be applied to almost any situation in which communication occurs and it prioritizes communicative processes within relational processes. Therefore, it is useful in understanding PTC and how communication impacts these relationships overall.

CAT's four main assumptions (West & Turner, 2014) were key in this study. First, CAT suggests that language and behaviors during conversation communicate social identity, social status, and group membership. Ethnic-racial minority parents frequently represent sociohistorical experiences and epistemological orientations that differ from White parents and White teachers (Lasky, 2000; Lawson, 2003). As such, these

differences may communicatively manifest in interpersonal interactions and conversation with their children's teachers and subsequently impact the PTR.

Second, conversations between individuals have speech and behavioral similarities and dissimilarities. Typically, individuals who share commonalities (e.g., beliefs, personalities, behaviors) tend to also have conversational similarities. Likewise, those who have differences tend to have conversational dissimilarities. Since ethnic-racial minority parents may have more demographic, sociocultural, and sociohistorical differences from teachers than White parents (Saluja, Early, & Clifford, 2002), it is possible that their communication would also have such dissimilarities.

Furthermore, CAT suggests that individuals communicatively converge or diverge with one another in conversation to emphasize similarities or differences, respectively. Communicative convergence entails adaptations that reduce social differences whereas communicative divergence encompasses the accentuation of verbal and nonverbal differences to emphasize dissimilarity between speakers and conversation partners. Individuals can converge or diverge in several ways including speech registers, prosody, pauses, and nonverbal communication, such as smiling and use of emblems and gestures (Dragojevic, Gasiorek, & Giles, 2014; Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991). For example, individuals may model another's speech and behaviors to seem similar or pleasing to that conversation partner. By aligning one's speech and behaviors to another's in conversation, similarities between the two become evidenced and emphasized. Therefore, these features of communication warrant examination in understanding parents' and teachers' communication with one another.

Third, CAT proposes that social conventions and cultural norms dictate how individuals accommodate to one another through communicative convergence or divergence. These conventions and norms also determine how their communicative speech, behaviors, and adaptations are perceived to be appropriate or inappropriate. It is possible that ethnic-racial minority parents may communicate in ways that reflect differing social customs and conventions (Han & Thomas, 2010).

Fourth, CAT suggests that the ways in which conversational speech and behaviors are perceived influence one's evaluation of the conversation. That is, how communicative messages are understood and interpreted impact how conversations are evaluated. Further, how communicators perceive their conversational partners' behavior will affect future encounters; positively rated conversations will lead to further communication whereas negative appraisals reduce the likelihood of future communication and conversation. It is therefore possible that ethnic-racial minority parents' communicative behaviors may be misinterpreted or deemed as inappropriate by teachers. Correspondingly, teachers may evaluate communication with ethnic-racial minority parents differently than they do communication with White parents. Consequently, PTRs may differ between White and ethnic-racial minority parents due in part to these communicative differences.

In sum, CAT presents tremendous usefulness in this study. First, it suggests that social differences manifest in communication. Since relationships are constituted in communication (Swick, 2003), communication in PTRs may reveal important differences between White parents and ethnic-racial minority parents. Examination of PTC is therefore warranted as communication is key to how parents and teachers share