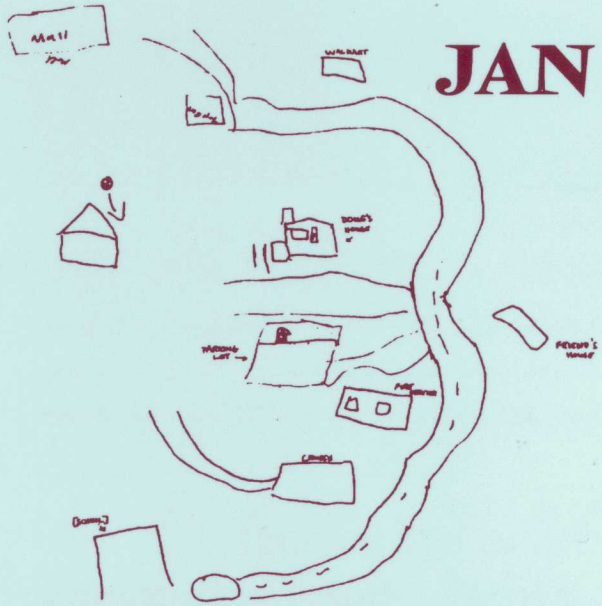

JAN NESPOR

TANGLED UP IN SCHOOL

Politics, Space, Bodies, and Signs in the Educational Process

1 Adults at Elementary School

During my two years at Thurber Elementary School, the principal, Mr. Watts, embraced, with varying levels of passion, a host of innovations: portfolio assessment, outcomes-based education, cognitive coaching, performance assessment, business–school partnerships, business-in-the-school programs, computer simulation curricula, volunteer mentoring programs, site-based management, whole language and writing process pedagogies, cross-age grouping, the integration of special education students into regular education classrooms, and nontraditional report cards. This barrage of innovations, unique among Roanoke schools, produced a good deal of opposition from the community.

The parents of children at the school were especially critical of the novel-based curriculum, the heterogeneous grouping of students, and the nontraditional grading scale. They often asked me, as an education professor, what I thought about such things and listened politely while I explained their value. But they remained skeptical; they conceded that such practices might work in an ideal world but not in the real world of the Roanoke city schools. By 1993–1994 their skepticism had developed into the organized protest described in this chapter. A breakdown in the usual silence between parents and teachers on matters of curriculum, the dispute forced both parties to articulate fundamental assumptions about the functions of schooling, in particular about the role of the school in representing, ranking, and categorizing students.

To understand the protest we have to unravel a historical–political–pedagogical knot in which subtle, complex, deeply layered flows of practice came together. First I examine how city and school system politics created a space for attempting innovations. Then I try to make sense of the Thurber innovations by looking at Mr. Watts's educational ideas and the teachers' struggles to understand and implement the innovations. Next I put the parents' relations to the school in context by reconstructing the history of Thurber's ties to the neighborhoods from

which its students came—a history that had recently included a turnover of the school's staff along with major changes in the boundaries of its attendence zone. Finally I turn to the protest itself and look at the perspectives that gave parents and educators their different understandings of the purposes of instruction and assessment.

POLITICS AND POWER SHAPE THE SPACES OF CURRICULUM

At the time of this study, many school boards in Virginia were still appointed rather than elected. In Roanoke a city council decided on board membership, and for decades prior to the 1980s their decisions had been influenced by a small elite of millionaire businessmen and corporate officers. When I asked an informant, who'd been politically active in the city for decades, how politicized the selection of the school board had been back in the 1960s, he replied:

> It's much more political *now,* I think. It used to be pretty cut and dried. [*Laughs*] A lot of people served forever on the school board....They just used the same people over and over and over. It was just this group that served on everything. But it's much more political now. *Much* more political.

In the old days, he explained: "People, like the group of millionaires, they'd say 'I think so and so ought to be on the school board' when a vacancy occured, and so and so would be put on the school board."

This situation began to change around 1980, when political interests other than those of the dominant business class gained influence in city politics. In particular, middle-class White property owners, feeling pinched by the declining regional economy, began a "tax revolt." My informant explained that, in 1980 and 1982 respectively, the city council (and through it, the school board) began to change with the elections of a couple of "populist" councilmen:

> They rode the wave of "gettin' the people"—"We're gonna serve the people"; "We need people on the council that's gonna look after the citizens, lower taxes," la-di-da....It was a tax revolt kind of thing [*Laughs*]. That was funny....They were the candidates of Concerned Taxpayers....I'm very fond of both of them. But about their first two or three years on Council, they weren't going to put a rubber stamp on *anything,* not on anything! Didn't make any difference. And that was when the school board began to change. 'Cause whatever the incumbents were for, they were against [*Laughs*].

Even before the city council shift, the school board was becoming increasingly antagonistic toward the entrenched administrative leader-

ship of the school system. When mistakes were discovered in the district budget in 1980, the board made the first break with tradition by firing the superintendent (Pack: "Severed relations," 1980). After a year-long search, the board made a second break by bringing in an outsider from New York, Frank Tota, to serve as the new superintendent. According to the school board chairman, Tota's mandate was to provide "the highest quality of instruction for the least possible cost" (Chamberlin, 1982a, p. A14). According to my informant:

> [Tota was] hired with that understanding, that he would clean house. And he did. And a lot of people blamed him. But it was understood before he came that he *would* do this. I mean, names were named. When he came he knew he had to get rid of certain people. [The school board had decided that? I asked. He nodded.]
>
> So he had an uphill battle. A lot of people here absolutely hated him when he came and did what he did. Because it was not known for a number of years that when he came, he knew he had to do this....You really couldn't blame him directly for the things that happened. But I guess with him came the advent of the modern school system that we have today in Roanoke City.

In the first 6 months of his tenure, in a system with 2 high schools, 6 junior high schools, and 21 elementary schools, Tota changed the principals of 10 schools, moved 9 assistant principals from 6 other schools, and reassigned or demoted 16 central office administrators. He began this process his first week on the job, with a series of lateral transfers and promotions that moved 9 principals or assistant principals and 11 central office administrators. There was no great public reaction to these moves, but things were different 6 months later when Tota demoted 16 veteran principals, assistant principals, and central administrators to lower-paying, lower-status positions. Given no warning or opportunity to defend themselves before the decision, the demoted administrators received form letters that varied only in the reasons given for their demotion. One junior high principal was told: "You have failed to demonstrate sensitivity toward students from lower socio-economic groups and have not responded in a satisfactory manner to their educational and sociological needs" (Chamberlin, 1982b, p. A1). One principal of an elementary school was reassigned with this explanation: "You have not indicated superior knowledge of elementary curriculum and program development" (Chamberlin, 1982b, p. A1). Because the administrators were merely "reassigned" rather than fired, they had few due process rights in the matter. Their fates, however, triggered widespread criticism of Tota among educators. Tense relations between central office administrators and teachers persisted for years.

Reshaping School–Community Ties

Along with cutting costs and reducing the number of administrators, the reassignments signaled a break with past practice. A newspaper editorial of the period described Tota's moves as a necessary shake-up of the system ("Upheaval," 1982):

> There *is* a rough consensus...on why Tota was hired. The city school system for years has limped along with deadwood in the ranks. The Peter Principle operated freely. A dozen or so administrators were elevated to their levels of incompetence and they stayed put.
>
> The new superintendent was told to clean out the deadwood. In a series of moves, he has shaken up both the central administration and at least half of the system's schools. (p. A8)

But if most people seemed to agree there was "deadwood" in the school system, others questioned some of the demotions. The elementary school principal mentioned earlier was a 30-year veteran of the system who had strong ties to the community served by his school and seemed to have been well liked and respected by teachers, parents, and pupils. When his demotion was announced, teachers and parents rallied to his support and submitted petitions to the school board asking that he not be reassigned; the parent teacher association's petition contained the signatures of 80% of the school's families (Chamberlin, 1982c). Nevertheless, the school board endorsed his demotion along with the others recommended by Tota.

My point is not to defend the principal or the Roanoke schools as they were before Tota's arrival but to suggest that in addition to trimming "deadwood," the reassignments fractured whatever collegial and communal ties might have existed between school personnel and the parents of the kids attending their schools. This kind of break in relations between parents and schools had begun to affect most of the city's African American communities a decade or more earlier, as urban renewal and desegregation undercut neighborhood schooling and community involvement (see chapter 3). Tota merely extended the process to the European American communities. In contrast to previous regimes, his administration marked a period in which principals and teachers were frequently reassigned from one school to another. These transfers made it more difficult for educators to develop close relationships with the communities served by their schools, to define clear roles for community members in school activities, or to develop bases of support among parents. In some cases, this loosening of community ties might have made it possible to innovate, to change neighborhood schools into magnet schools, for example. But, as we'll see was the case at Thurber, the weakening of community attachments could also make it difficult to implement and maintain support for innovations over the long term.

Centralizing Control

Within Tota's new administration, schools and teachers were placed under increased scrutiny from the central office. Teachers were pressured to adopt routinized, textbook-driven teaching methods—a kind of technical control (Edwards, 1979) buttressed by frequent administrator observations. Elementary teachers, for example, were expected to use an "instructional management systems" approach involving weekly, chapter by chapter, pre- and post-test measures of student achievement. At the high schools teachers were drilled in "effective teaching" methods. A year after the demotions, a feature article in the local newspaper, based on more than 50 interviews with teachers and administrators, painted a dismal scene (Chamberlin, 1983):

> Few of those interviewed were willing to speak up and be identified....Several teachers and administrators said they have been told at staff meetings or individually that teachers and administrators who don't conform to prescribed methods and who don't measure up to the new standards can be replaced. They said they have been told that public criticism of the system will not be tolerated. "Tota said, 'You play on my team or you don't,'" an administrator said [paragraphing suppressed]. (p. A12)

Not surprisingly, morale plummeted and remained low for years. Teachers reported increased stress and illness and a vastly diminished sense of control over their practice (Chamberlin, 1983; Jones, 1985). High school teachers were warned that they would be expected to do better, regardless of how well they'd done in the past:

> An assistant principal at [one of the high schools] sent this memo to his teachers in November regarding their evaluations: "If you are doing no more than you have done in previous years, your progress will certainly be considered wanting, and the assessments will reflect a need for improvement" [paragraphing surpressed]. (Chamberlin, 1983, p. A12)

These policies suggest a change strategy designed to produce quick and highly visible results. Instead of, say, bringing together groups of teachers, parents, and students to talk about the state of the schools, to study or analyze the system, and then to systematically experiment with different reforms, reform was accomplished through the adoption of visible markers of innovation (e.g., effective teaching strategies), and intrusive evaluations were used to enforce at least token compliance. Internally, the routinized teacher evaluations strengthened central administration power by translating pedagogy into stable, standardized, mobile representations that could be accumulated at the cen-

tral office and there used to compare, rank, reward, and punish (cf. Latour, 1987). Externally, the high visiblity of the control strategies seemed designed to address the concerns of an increasingly conservative public audience being told by media and government reports that the nation was "at risk" because of its inadequate schools.

Standardized testing became a major emphasis in the schools for similar reasons. Testing reduced students to scores, numbers on paper that could be collected and combined to produce comparisons across schools and judgments about the performances of particular schools. Although Superintendent Tota insisted he did not want teachers "teaching to the test," teachers consistently complained that they were being directed to do so (e.g., Jones, 1985). Even at the time of my fieldwork, more than a decade after these events, the district was still known for its preoccupation with testing. When I talked to my Virginia Tech colleagues who supervised student teachers in Roanoke city elementary schools, they told stories like the following:

> I have one student teacher that I'm very—the placement I had her, I don't know that I got to see her do hardly any teaching at all, because of the fact that every time I would go, they were preparing for a standardized test. And this was a fourth-grade classroom. And it was constant....There was a lot of emphasis on preparing for the tests. Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS)....They were doing a lot of worksheet type things. They were doing some pre-tests; they were doing situations set up as testing situations. And actually then—it was a format; some of it was standardized it looked like, that they were using. And this was for about 3 or 4 weeks out of a placement. It was every time I would go.

A preoccupation with test scores might be common in U.S. schools, but it had a special resonance and political meaning in Roanoke. As I'll explain further in the next chapter, Roanoke City had been in economic decline since the mid-1970s and grew progressively poorer than surrounding Roanoke County. Quality of life issues—education, for example—were important to city leaders' attempts to keep affluent residents from leaving and to make the city more attractive to county residents. Yet standardized test scores, one of the most obvious ways to compare schools and school districts, consistently favored the County over the City by a wide margin. Thus, in addition to its use as a control mechanism, the stress on raising scores stemmed in part from a need to improve the public image of the city's schools.

The result within the district, however, was a kind of punctuated curriculum in which elementary schools interrupted their teaching for weeks at a time to coach students for the tests. Outside of this test preparation, there was little consistency in curriculum from one elementary school to another. One of my colleagues at the university, who had worked with both Roanoke city and suburban Roanoke County schools, remarked on how different city schools were from one another, in part

because of the relatively short tenures principals spent at particular schools:

> I've been struck by the differences among the buildings [in the city], and that would really hit somebody who's spent a lot of time in Roanoke County schools, because those [county] schools are more notable for their similarities than their differences. But the differences in the city schools—and I have a feeling that they're centered around the principal quite a bit—that they have a lot of authority. Which is interesting, because I know they [central administration] move people around; they're not there for a long long time. I think probably all the principals I work with, of the three that I work with, none of them have been in their jobs more than 3 or 4 years at the most. And there are very different styles, very different things going on in the schools.

This variability across schools was largely a result of a feudal dynamic running through Tota's administration. By *feudal* I mean a system in which administrators survived or perished not on the basis of their adherence to official procedure but by virtue of their loyalty to the top official (cf. Ball, 1987, p. 89). One of Tota's first moves as superintendent had been to centralize authority over principals. Previously such authority had been delegated to mid-level administrators (directors of elementary and secondary education), but Tota abolished these positions and placed himself at the top of a chain of command that included his assistant superintendents and instructional supervisors. The feudal flavor of this arrangement arose from the way Tota would detach himself from the actions of his mid-level administrators. Principals could get the superintendent's support for actions the other administrators might disagree with or take refuge under the superintendent's wing if these administrators attempted to intervene in the schools. The line of authority, in such situations, became a direct one between Tota and the principal. At the elementary level at least, this feudal dynamic meant that individual principals could acquire considerable autonomy in shaping teaching and curriculum—so long as they remained in Tota's favor and their test scores didn't decline.

In this highly differentiated, bureaucratic–feudal situation, in which parents had been effectively excluded as political actors, Mr. Watts, in his first principalship, was able to introduce striking changes at Thurber. The power structure did not *cause* these changes but simply created a space for reform, albeit a risky and difficult space. Innovations were possible, but only at the level of the individual school, without systemic support.[1] What drove changes were the principals, such as Mr. Watts.

[1]The exception to this statement might be the school division's magnet schools effort, initiated by Superintendent Tota to transform a number of schools within the city. As each magnet school had a different curricular focus, however, the effect was to reinforce the curricular fragmentation of the city school system.

MR. WATTS'S TRANSFORMATION OF THE CURRICULUM

Mr. Watts had come to Roanoke after teaching middle school in Georgia for 6 years and getting a master's degree in administration. Within a year, he'd landed an elementary school vice principalship and had begun looking for ways to change the schools:

> When I [became an assistant principal in Roanoke] I had not read or heard the words "whole language," but I knew that the way we were doing things wasn't working. And I knew, I knew [*Pause*] in my mind that the Madeline Hunter model[2] was not working. And I was seeing a tremendous amount of teaching, teaching, teaching, teaching, teaching—but it wasn't getting us very far.

When I asked him how he knew that what he saw going on in classrooms "wasn't working," he referred to his own teaching experiences:

> Well, I taught in Georgia, and I had a large number of indigent children. And sitting and trying to teach—to get seventh or fifth graders, who've repeated once or twice if not three times by the time they get to that level—trying to teach them to add or subtract—and that's just an example—trying to teach them to do something that absolutely does not relate to their world and makes no sense to them—I might as well talk to the wall. And trying to go through a textbook with children who are absolutely not interested, because they have no need, to me is failure. It's just not doing what they need. And what I felt as an adult was that I had to create within these children a need to know. They didn't even have a need to know! I mean, they had kind of zeroed out on life, already. And...[it] was interesting, because there, we always had to write our objectives, and then we had to go through and show what we were going to do, and it was like—as long as it looked good on the paper, and the person who checked my plans read it and it looked good to them, then they assumed that what I was doing in the classroom must be okay. And it wasn't....Kids could go to sixth grade and, to me, not know a lot more than what they did when they were in fifth. That says to me the system isn't working.

[2]Madeline Hunter was a lecturer in education at the University of California who marketed an algorithmic teaching model (Hunter, 1984) based on the effective teaching research of the 1970s. Her model defined a series of teaching behaviors held to correlate with student test score gains. Teaching guidelines and teacher evaluation systems based on this model have been used throughout the United States (see Gibbony, 1994, for a critical discussion). For Mr. Watts and others, the problem with the model was that it focused on teaching behaviors stripped from their contexts in the flow of real classroom practice: It encouraged a mechanistic, teacher-centered pedagogy that precluded whole language approaches, cooperative learning, and most other strategies Mr. Watts wanted his teachers to embrace.

In the next chapter I discuss how this idea that teachers should be creating internal *needs* in kids (and its corollary that kids had "zeroed out on life") led Mr. Watts to experiment with the idea of reshaping classrooms to resemble businesses. Here, I merely note that this perspective intensified his feeling that the schools weren't working. He became determined to try something new once he became a principal:

> When I was able to make the transition from a vice principal where I took orders to a principal where I hoped to form a consensus, I was able to say, "Let's rethink this; let's relook at how children learn." And I don't think I even said it that way. I think what I did was, just very slowly began to introduce other options....Here in the division [teachers are expected to follow] the "elements of an effective lesson," and they are truly the sacraments—they are! And if you don't dispense the sacraments daily, you have done something irreligious. And I knew what kind of pressure that would put on people; that the whole division is performing the sacraments every day, and we aren't. And so the first year, I just didn't discuss it. I just—didn't talk it; just let it go. I didn't necessarily require it, but I didn't pooh-pooh it either. And so we went a year, year and a half, and it was just became kind of nebulous. And I think what people began to do was to begin to feel free from it.

At this point, *whole language* entered the picture. Mr. Watts seized on a remark by the superintendent and used it as a warrant for the innovations he wanted to introduce:

> I do remember that along the way, [Superintendent] Tota expressed interest in whole language and he liked the concept. And quite honestly I played that one as hard as I could play it, anytime I needed to. Because there are those betwixt us that are not predisposed to whole language....I've had many a lecture. I've had lectures one on one, two on one, and I've had lectures at meetings, when no one knew who was being barked at, but I knew who was being barked at. I've had a lot of those....[One administrator], for example, made it very clear that she thought whole language was "whole stupidity." And again, I just look at it as she doesn't understand what's going on. She does not understand what whole language is about.

During his second year as principal, most teachers at Thurber switched to a curriculum organized around novels, which was the operational definition of whole language at the school. Mr. Watts supplied this rough summary:

> What we started talking about was using literature....At the same time we were trying to obey the state guidelines in terms of curriculum. For example, third grade—*communities* is a social studies concept, so...they start out in third grade studying their own community, and then instead of just studying their own community the whole year, they do a unit on it, and then they go off to China, then to Africa, then to Israel, and study

communities there, and try to do some sort of comparing....Fourth grade, we want to continue somehow dealing with Virginia history and the beginnings of this country....And they also do a novel called *Phoebe the Spy,* which works around—Phoebe was a free Black that lived in the [George] Washington household....Then in fifth grade we pick up with the Civil War, with literature, and they do *Harriet Tubman.* And they will do an Indian story, *Sing Down the Moon,* that takes place about 20 years after the Civil War. Then they'll do an immigrant story from around the turn of the century, when many of the immigrants were coming. And they'll do a depression story, and then a World War II or after story. So we're using the novels to get to the global issues as well as our own history, as well as trying to create a meaningful situation for the children where they're making connections, so that things are studied out of a need to know rather than just out of textbooks, and "Today we're going to add, and tomorrow we're going to subtract, or tomorrow we're going to learn about World War II." [This is obviously only a partial account. Other novels were used, and math and science were taught as well.]

Although this approach to curriculum differed from that of other principals in the school system, the formal features of the innovation paralleled the change dynamics Superintendent Tota had introduced: They flowed top–down from a central administrative position (the principal, in this case); the process excluded parents or community groups from planning and participation; and the innovations rested on a concept of the teacher as a lone expert dispensing pedagogy.

With reference to this last point, Mr. Watts introduced the literature-based curriculum in the face of opposition from central administrators who favored a more traditional, workbook-based, test-oriented approach. Because the district power structure prevented those administrators from simply imposing their will on Mr. Watts, many of his battles with them were fought indirectly, on the terrain of staffing. On some level, as I show in the next section, the assumption seemed to be that teaching skills inhered in the bodies of particular teachers, that teaching itself was a form of "embodied cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1986). Battles over a school's curriculum or teaching approach could thus turn into battles over which teachers were to work at the school.

STAFFING

When Mr. Watts was named principal of Thurber, he came to the school with a new faculty that included both veterans and teachers in only their second or third years in the field. Most of the newer teachers were willing to embrace Mr. Watts's innovations, in word if not in deed, but some of the more experienced teachers were unwilling to abandon textbook-based teaching styles that, after all, had been pushed on them for a decade by powerful administrators. Part of Mr. Watts's response was to

look for new teachers, a task that required perseverance and political will. When I asked him how much control he had over selecting teachers, he explained:

Let me give you an example. Mrs. Peel, for example, there was an interesting history with that one. I knew she was interested in whole language. The school where she was, the principal was very supportive of *her,* but there was no one else there interested in whole language. And I thought she'd be a great support for us, because the teachers had all been up to observe in her room; they respected her, they would be very willing to go into her room and observe, and learn from her. And I thought, "What a great person to have right here in the building; that's like having in-house staff development."...So I thought, now, how do I do this? How do I ethically, morally, how do I do this? So I trotted...down to Superintendent Tota and I asked him. I said "I'd like to know, what is the procedure for requesting a person, who is within the division, who you think would be good for your school, what's the procedure?" And he...said, you go to the principal, tell him that you would like to have that person, and tell that person if they're interested to put it in writing to personnel. And it shouldn't be a problem. And so I did.

Well, there were all kinds of problems. All kinds of problems. In fact, the director of personnel told that principal that there would *not* be a transfer, that it was not going to happen. And so I just sat and waited until I got that piece of information, and when I got that piece of information, I went to Tota...and I said, "I want Mrs. Peel. I did what you told me to do, and I want her at Thurber next year." And he said, "She will be there next year." And the transfer happened.

This story shows Mr. Watts's adroitness at working the system and his willingness to take political risks. It also illustrates how the superintendent could disrupt the bureaucratic chain of command to forge a direct, quasi-feudal bond between himself and a principal. Still, in most cases the central office decided where teachers were assigned, and there was no guarantee they would end up with principals who shared their educational philosophies. Several Thurber teachers didn't embrace the literature-based curriculum and weren't particularly loyal to Mr. Watts. This lack of fealty created problems, since Mr. Watts's management style depended on interpersonal ties rather than on bureaucratic procedures or administrative directives (Ball, 1987). The reader might wonder, for example, why teachers stuck with him through the whirl of demanding innovations. The answer is that, despite all the frustrations, Mr. Watts was not harsh, intrusive, or threatening in his relations with teachers. He refused to impose his ideas on teachers or even to require them to reach a consensus among themselves. So long as recalcitrant teachers didn't publicly dispute his authority or broadcast their differences, Mr. Watts didn't directly confront them. Instead, he waited for them to come around or to leave the school. The result, at least in the short run, was

that there was little continuity in teaching from classroom to classroom. Going from one room to another, even at the same grade level, could mean moving from one philosophy of teaching to another, one curriculum to another. At Thurber, these discontinuities confused parents and left some teachers feeling isolated.

TEACHING DEFINED AT THE INTERSECTION OF THEORY AND ORGANIZATION

McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) noted in their study of secondary education that classrooms in the same school (or even within the same department in a school) often differ because teachers hold different interpretations of student capabilities. But classrooms also vary, at least in part, because pedagogy has been institutionally defined as residing in the person of the teacher. Teaching—not just at Thurber but at all the schools I'm familiar with in this region—is treated as a quality of *individual* teachers rather than of the faculty as a whole or of the relationships between teachers and the community. Although this definition might have suited teachers set in their habits, it created enormous problems for Thurber teachers who wanted to change how they taught but who had trouble finding opportunities for the conversation and learning they wanted and needed.

On the rare occasions when the faculty as a whole could talk about these issues, the format for discussion was to present an idealized picture of how whole language *should* work, without articulating a concrete pathway leading teachers to that promised land. During an in-service day before the beginning of my second year of fieldwork, Mrs. Peel, the whole language practitioner Mr. Watts had struggled to get transferred to the school, was "interviewed" by the rest of the faculty about her teaching. At one point, Mrs. Court, a fourth-grade teacher, explained that, after switching from textbooks and workbooks to novels, she was now having trouble turning the literature-based curriculum into a whole language approach. She felt that she was teaching the novels rather than integrating them into longer strands of thematically linked instruction:

> My problem is I have the novels and I'm making the transition and making really lots of really kind of strict plans for myself using those novels. So I'm using the novels and doing some neat lessons around that novel. I'm still keeping things so much more structured than the way I want for them to be. And it's hard to...to ask the right questions and, you know, how to, how to plan, even. How to really plan.

Mrs. Peel responded that the use of novels was not necessarily the same as the whole language approach: "I think one of the problems is...we kind of basalize the novel. We're afraid that they'll miss something out of that novel." Before her transfer to Thurber, Mrs. Peel had led whole language in-service workshops for Thurber teachers in which she'd apparently emphasized novel-focused teaching. Thus some of the teachers were confused to hear her now emphasizing thematic units. Mrs. Tanner asked her:

> Have your thoughts on whole language changed since you instructed us as a faculty in the beginning? A lot of us, I think, got from your information then, you know: We start with a novel and that is part of our springboard to do things and now...well, now it's changing. Now, it's do your theme and just let the novels just appear, you know. We always went, at least in our grade level we've gone with, you know, a time line idea theme. And we chose, and well, I mean, I guess they have kind of evolved, but how has your idea of whole language changed?

Mrs. Peel responded by explaining the evolution of her ideas in terms of her individual growth as a teacher:

> Well, the...more I have done this and the longer that I've done it, I have found that allowing kids to choose their novels, based on a particular theme, is probably the most satisfying thing I have ever done. And so that has helped me to get away from everybody doing one novel even though we have done [that]....Gradually move into that. I don't think next week you would want to give the whole class one novel and say, "Go off, kids, and read your novel."

Mrs. Peel then referred to a week-long summer workshop she'd attended a month earlier on outcomes-based education. The workshop had emphasized focusing on desired outcomes and then planning backward to thematic units and performance assessments based on teacher-defined rubrics:

> But I, what really has turned me on is what we did this summer, with, the going from the outcomes to the essential questions. And, and it really has, has made the picture so much broader for me too, and so now, a novel will be incorporated into what I'm doing, and will certainly have to be congruent with what I'm doing. But it won't have to be be just one novel.

Translating this broad picture into concrete practice was no simple matter, though. For Mrs. Tanner and for other teachers, the problem wasn't in the theory, but in their feeling of lacking the individual expertise to pull it off. Thus Mrs. Tanner responded to Mrs. Peel:

> Well, I was just thinking....I've tried to [refine things], at least the past two years, I've tried to, of course every year things have changed and it's

grown. But I've been allowed to refine what I've done rather than just—I don't know—I'm just not as good as you. I just can't cast everything into the wind and . . .

Mrs. Peel interrupted to reassure her that she wasn't suggesting that her way was the only way: "As long as you adopt the whole language principles, there's so many ways, I think, to implement the principles. And just, you know, you're not expected to do the way that everybody else [does]. . . ."

The other teachers, however, especially the ones who genuinely wanted to adopt whole language principles, felt they were navigating without a map. Mrs. Court asked: "Do you think it was easier to make the transition from where we were as a traditional teacher to where we might be now using our novels the way we do, than it is to go from where we are now. . . ."

"On to something new?" Mrs. Tanner completed the question.

"I had a huge, I mean it's such a big step," Mrs. Court began, and then as other teachers began to jump into the converstion, talking over each other, Mrs. Peel responded:

No it's not [a big step]. It's not. It's a progression. And you can do it. You can do it. Because you came from a traditional classroom to using, you know, having your things centered around your novel and, and you may not want to go this other way, but that doesn't make you any less a Whole Language teacher....Well then, if you are in your one novel, then divide your kids into literature study groups....You can grow into that. And, you know, it's a slow process....And I've been doing it all these years and this is where I am now. But it's been a steady and a slow progression because I've wanted it. I've learned so much over the years and nobody has made me do any of it. I've wanted to do it on my own. And I find something else and, man, I really like this. It excites me so much that I can see how that. I have this other to build on. But nobody is expecting you to go from one novel to, you know, this broad theme, where everybody does their own thing.

Mrs. Peel obviously meant to reassure the others, but by denying the difficulty they were encountering, denying the sense in which, for many, it *was* a huge step and not a "progression," she may have only confused the pedagogical issue. Mrs. Tanner and Mrs. Court knew they weren't doing what Mrs. Peel did, but they couldn't see how to make the transition. Teaching was so identified as an internal, individual attribute that Mrs. Tanner could only throw up her hands and tell Mrs. Peel, "I'm just not as good as you," while Mrs. Court suffered through the year trying to find her bearings and attributing her difficulties to some sort of personal failing. On the last day before Christmas break during the school year that began with the interview I've just summarized, I reminded Mrs. Court that at the beginning of the semester she'd been determined to do things differently but had been unsure about how to proceed. I asked whether she felt on firmer ground now. She replied:

Only because I think I've backed off from my conviction—I mean, I'm not—I know I'm going to make some changes but I'm not expecting to do everything right now. I'm allowing myself to use the English book, and I'm allowing myself to use the spelling book. [*Long pause*] I feel more uncomfortable this year than I've ever felt. But I don't know how much of that is—I just don't spend that much time on school now. I think it really takes a lot of time. For me. I have to work at it. I have to plan, and I haven't been planning like I would in the past. Of course that was more direct teaching....And [now] I don't know what we're going to do from one minute to the next. It's a lot harder! It's much easier to teach directly, I think—well, no, that's not true. When I get to the point where I hope I am in five years, I'll feel more comfortable and it'll be easier. But right now it would be much easier if I could just go back to the way I taught. I knew I was *teaching* then. Now I don't know if I'm teaching....I was feeling pretty much on solid ground when I left. Although I've always been unsure of myself in a lot of ways. But I was feeling confident in my teaching. And I'm just not this year. But I feel better now than I did at the beginning of the year. I've just given myself permission to not take on too much. And I also am reminding myself that the kids are learning, even though it's in a different way.

Nias (1989), in her study of English primary school teachers reported that "virtually every teacher responded to my request to explain what it was to 'feel like a teacher' by saying that it was to be in control" (p. 187). Mrs. Court, in trying to change the system of control that organized her classroom by giving kids greater control over their work, experienced a kind of pedagogical vertigo. She no longer felt as though she were teaching and could only attribute this to a personal shortcoming.

Teaching, then, was defined as something found in the bounded bodies of teachers. The idea that teaching might be a function of biography and long-developing relations to materials and communities—or even more radically that teaching could be thought of as a collective accomplishment of groups of teachers working together—had no place in the dominant educational discourse that located the meaning of teaching in individual pedagogical expertise. That Mrs. Peel had taught for close to 20 years and both Mrs. Tanner and Mrs. Court had taught for less than 5 was irrelevant in the terms of the discourse.

Where did this "dominant educational discourse" come from? It followed partly from the spatial and temporal organization of schools: the physical separation of teachers and their lack of time to associate. Partly it was a function of school system policy, in which administrators

evaluated and scrutinized individual teachers rather than collectives of collaborating teachers. And partly, as I suggest later in this chapter, the discourse of the lone teacher came from colleges of education, from people like me.

THE SHIFTING MEANINGS OF THE TERM *WHOLE LANGUAGE*

The Thurber teachers were thus uncertain about the meaning of whole language: Did it refer to a novel-based curriculum, a theme-based curriculum, or what? In fact, the concept had been given myriad definitions throughout the school system. Mrs. Peel once told me she'd met teachers at other schools in the city who claimed to teach whole language with basal textbooks or to use a basal approach in the morning and a whole language approach in the afternoon. She remembered one teacher observing her classroom as kids worked collaboratively in groups and asking "When do you *teach* whole language?" Yet even Mrs. Peel, confident in presenting her work as whole language to other teachers, could be uncertain about the meaning of the term in her interactions with outsiders. The first time I visited her classroom, before she realized how ignorant I was, she approached me at the end of the day and asked whether what she was doing was whole language. Organizing instruction around novels, she explained, was more or less the way she'd always taught, and she'd picked up this whole language terminology only when she'd taken a couple of years off from teaching to work for a textbook publisher.

The term *whole language,* then, worked within the settings examined here like a *shifter* (Jakobson, 1971; Silverstein, 1976; see also Hanks, 1990), a part of speech whose meaning or "referent" "'shifts' regularly, depending on the factors of the speech situation" (Silverstein, 1976, p. 24).[3] The sense or referent of "whole language" varied with the speaker and the power dynamics of the speech situation. Teachers whose classroom practices might appear to me polar opposites could both claim to be doing whole language in explaining themselves to parents. To me, though, they might express uncertainty about the term and its relevance to what they were doing. In fact, in the instances I can find in my data where the term was used (and they are surprisingly infrequent), it seems to have been part of a boundary-generating discourse. Higher-status participants in unequal encounters (e.g., teachers talking to parents) introduced or used the term to define their domain of practice

[3]*Whole language* is not really a shifter in a technical linguistic sense, but, as used at Thurber, it had many of the qualities of a shifter. My apologies to purists.

and essentially to exclude others from the discussion by reducing them to asking for definitions of the term. When participants in a conversation were roughly equals in status, as in the discussion among teachers just reported, the meaning of the term slid about maddeningly. The teachers were simultaneously being told that there was an ideal model of whole language (exemplified by Mrs. Peel) *and* that all teachers could follow the model differently, at their own pace, by themselves. Each teacher, it seemed, was expected to define the term and reinvent the approach.

Because whole language functioned as a shifter, the term could flow freely across settings, as it was unattached to a stable collection of practices. At the same time, the meanings of the term were spatialized as purely local phenomena circumscribed by a particular teacher's practice, the space of the classroom, a space usually opaque to outsiders. "Whole language" could become a key element of a dominant educational discourse and more concretely the accepted approach of a school like Thurber. But it did so in such a way that made productive conversation with and about the term almost impossible, since different teachers used the term to mean quite different things.

Later in this chapter, I discuss the problem of defining whole language teaching in this individualized, localized way. My point here is that the situation among faculty at Thurber was a tenuous balance of stresses within a highly unstable political and community context; the innovations at the school were grounded in a fundamentally weak organizational base. As a result, some teachers were unsure of themselves, and most of the parents I met, saw, and heard at Thurber, did not support the school's approach to teaching and assessment.

PARENT RESISTANCE

I've described how it was possible for Mr. Watts to introduce his innovations at Thurber and I've suggested that the historical shaping of the school division pushed these innovations along certain paths so that they were theory driven, administratively centralized, decoupled from communities, and focused on the capacities of individual teachers. But the mix that came together at Thurber also included parents.

Waller (1961) once suggested that parents are inevitably at odds with teachers because they remember their own unpleasant experiences as students: "Each generation of teachers pays in turn for the sins of the generation that has gone before" (p. 59). But parents can also disagree with teachers when things *aren't* the same as when they'd been kids. The literature-based curriculum introduced at Thurber was a big change for parents and kids. Most had been satisfied with textbook-based teaching. For example, one afternoon I was talking to Mrs.

Longman and her son Neal and going through their collections of Neal's work from first grade through fifth. When Mrs. Longman couldn't find anything from Neal's second-grade year, she realized it was because he'd done nothing but worksheets and textbook-based activities:

> I don't know if I've got anything in here for second [grade]. He was in Mrs. Quirty's room. You know her? Wonderful lady. I love her to death. I think she was one of Neal's best teachers....I don't think I have anything for second grade. . . I don't know; it was just so different, second grade.

Mrs. Quirty had been teaching for 30-odd years and lived in the neighborhood. "You didn't do a lot of writing?" I asked Neal.

"Mrs. Quirty taught from the books, didn't she?" his mother asked him.

"She taught straight from the book," Neal replied.

"I mean," Mrs. Longman explained to me, "he had his little spelling book he brought home. He had to learn so many words. Of course, like I said, Neal never had to study, because he knew them."

Neal himself seemed to remember those days fondly:

> When I came to third grade, they didn't have spelling books; they cut them off the list of books. I don't know why, but then they pushed to novels, which seemed to bore everybody. [*Laughs*]. People just don't like them.

It wasn't that Neal disliked reading. Mrs. Longman told me: "He says, 'Give me a subject I really like and let me read about that.'"

"Give me a shark book or something," Neal interjected.

"They don't let you choose, do they?" I asked.

Neal replied with vehemence:

> No they don't! I was saying...on this book [*Onion John*] here they're letting us do our own vocabulary and test each other. But, they don't let us choose our own books. Most people aren't being very serious on their vocabulary. Of course I don't look that much either. I just look at what happened in the story. I'm not looking for vocab.

What he'd like to see, Neal explained, would be for the teachers to say: "'You have to have a novel. It has to be so many pages, at least 100 pages long—at least that—and you can have it, and you can read it. But you have to have it done by this deadline.'"

This, of course, is the same issue Mrs. Peel and the other teachers were debating. For Mrs. Longman, though, the issue wasn't pedagogy but her son's manifest dislike for the novel-based approach and her own uncertainty about why the school had made the switch to it.

Several years into the switch to novels, she was far from alone in her uncertainty. In the "interview" of Mrs. Peel I quoted from earlier, Mrs. West told the other teachers:

> [I have] already had a lot parents with questions....And there are a lot of apprehensions and so forth, especially about, as you say, whole language and also about evaluation. How do you help parents? I mean, I've had conferences already this way. And a lot of, lot of questions.

"Have we ever had a letter or any, a newsletter, a Whole Language Newsletter for parents?" Mrs. Peel asked.

Mrs. West replied: "No we haven't, and I think, I wish, I've had it written down in my journal. I think we need to address this. Parents are quite concerned."

These concerns often came to rest on the most visible manifestation of Thurber's changes. Along with the shift to a novel-based curriculum, Mr. Watts made Thurber one of a handful of schools in the district to adopt an alternative marking and report card system. At first, the school switched from a five-category (A–B–C–D–F) system to one with two basic categories: Developing Understanding (DU) and Developing Comprehension (DC). That first year, the school sent home explanations of the new grade scale and held meetings to introduce the new report cards to parents, but there was still loud opposition.

One parent, Mrs. Hunt, recalled that the number of categories, rather than the specific letters, created problems for parents trying to translate between old and new systems. She contrasted Thurber's grading system with that of another school in the neighborhood, Gold Hill:

> Now, when they threw out the A, B, C, D number system, Gold Hill threw it out too, but they [Gold Hill] made four out of five, and the parents didn't get too excited. They could understand O in their mind was pretty good A or B; they could understand satisfactory was about like a C—you know, they had something there. But here, with DU and DC, only two categories, they couldn't understand anything about this report card.

Mrs. Graham, one of the parents interviewed in early 1993, recalled that immediately following the introduction of the new grading scheme at Thurber, "When you went to PTA it was like a chaos. Parents didn't like it. They said their kids didn't like it."

A year later, in response to parents' complaints, the school switched to an M-T-N—Mastered, Trying, Needs help—grading scale. The switch from a two-level scale to a three-level scale, however, failed to mollify the parents, and by late 1993, my second year at the school, they'd begun to organize.

Public Protest

I first heard about plans for a protest just before Christmas 1993, when Mrs. Grigsby, who had two kids in the school, stopped me in the parking lot and told me about a "rambunctuous meeting" of parents at which

people were almost "out of control" in their criticisms of the school. The meeting had been set up through the PTA at Mr. Watts's instigation in response to a growing chorus of parent complaints. Later that day, after school, I told Mrs. Court of my conversation: "Mrs. Grigsby caught me out in the parking lot this morning, talking about the—they did have a meeting, right?—and she said it was raucous."

"Yeah," Mrs. Court replied, "I didn't know if I was supposed to say anything about it."

"Apparently Mr. Watts told them to do it?" I asked.

Mrs. Court explained:

> Well, he told them to, but—he told them to. But he never—I think they were planning on getting together in January, but they were so, there was so much, you know, concern was so heightened that they just went ahead and met now. And there was a lot of—I think there was a lot of angry feeling. Mrs. Moon said, "Yeah, we wrote everything down and typed it." And I think they're handling this so that if they have to present this to somebody who can make a difference, who can change things, they will. I don't know, I don't know what their plan is. But I think they really feel like Mr. Watts won't listen, and so if they're going to do something with it, I don't think they're going to go to him.

As Mrs. Court predicted, the parents sent Mr. Watts a letter instead of meeting with him. The date on the letter was January 24, 1994. The authors signed themselves "Concerned Parents." "In an effort to expand communications between the staff at Thurber School and the parents," the letter began, "we present to you an outline of concerns." Stressing their support for teachers, the parents nonetheless complained about what was taught, how it was taught, and how students' performances were recorded and communicated. They wrote:

> While we are receptive to the philosophy that it promotes a positive self-esteem, we are concerned that the current grading scale is not widespread enough to closely evaluate a student's progress.
>
> If the level of learning was more evident and the parents were assured of acceptable placement at middle school and beyond, the current grading scale could be tolerated.
>
> While using the current M-N-T system, some teachers "save" the Ms for the fourth grading period [at year end]. Hasn't the child "mastered" anything along the way? The lack of consistency among teachers is discouraging.
>
> With our feelings of a lack of basic structural learning, how can parents ignore rumors regarding the progress of Thurber students in the middle schools? . . .

> Parents have little evidence of basic learning. The higher technology should be addressed by the middle and high schools.
>
> . . . The students have come from and will return to, schools with more basic-learning structures and more traditional grading scales. We feel that [the] non-ranking...will only confuse and frustrate students further when they move on to middle school, where they will suddenly be ranked once again. We understand the reasoning for not ranking, however, we stress the need for a "reality check." Children cannot totally elude being ranked.
>
> If we must divide the responsibilities of learning among schools and parents, we feel the most important lessons, basic instruction, must come from the school. Teachers cannot be responsible for teaching everything. Basic lessons must come first and foremost. Time constraints dictate what must be learned outside the classroom.
>
> ..... .
>
> We welcome a system where parents are informed at least weekly as to the students' progress. Under the current system, parents feel left in the dark as to lesson plans. Some teachers are willing to go the extra mile to communicate with parents. Unfortunately, others aren't willing to meet with parents at acceptable times....We feel that Thurber caters to the low achievers. The average student and the high achiever are not challenged but relied on to "pull" the lower students. This "pairing" may be intimidating to the lower achiever and may also impede the progress of the others. We feel it is not in the best interest of all students to pair more aggressive learners with those who need more attention.

Fear and Protest

Parental displeasure doesn't routinely produce organized opposition and letters of this sort, and the authors of the Thurber letter would seem unlikely candidates to lead such protests. Most of them were working-class European American parents from the neighborhood around the school. Yet unlike the working-class parents Lareau (1989) interviewed, who "did not supervise, compensate for, or attempt to intervene in their children's program," who instead "'trusted' the school to educate their children" (p. 169), these parents were confrontational and organized themselves to openly challenge school officials. Many of the teachers, good middle-class parents themselves, wouldn't have dreamed of confronting their kids' teachers as they were being confronted. Even Mr. Watts, a highly articulate middle-class professional, hestitated to complain to the teachers or the principal at the public school *his* child attended in another part of the city for fear he'd "be viewed as pushy, a troublemaker, and it would come back on my kid."

Whether the parents in question are middle class or working class, such fear is predictable in a school system where ties between schools

and communities have been ruptured. And some Thurber parents *were* hesitant to complain. Mrs. Graham, who was active and vocal in the PTA, acknowledged that some parents wouldn't talk to teachers about problems: "Some feel like it's going to hurt their child. Maybe some concern, they might think 'Well, that's going to hinder my child, the teacher's going to frown upon them.'"

Mrs. Kaiser provided an example from her son's fourth-grade year:

> [He and his teacher] just didn't hit it off at all. I kept hopin' all through the year that things would change and they would start to get along, but it never worked out that way....I talked to her a couple of times. But, uh, I talked to Mr. Watts—she, she has a way of hollering at kids. She did a lot of hollering. And I said something to Mr. Watts about that. And he advised me to—they have a journal that they wrote in, and he advised me to have Earl write in the journal, and then for both of us to sign it, and then that way she would get the message that she shouldn't holler. And I, I was kind of against that, because I figured it might cause him more problems than he was already having. So I didn't say anything.

This failure to "say anything" on the part of working-class parents does not imply, as Lareau (1989) suggested, that:

> Working-class parents looked up to teachers. They saw, quite correctly, a gulf between themselves and "educated people." Working-class parents talked, sometimes with awe in their voices, of people they had known who were "brains" or "walking encyclopedias." As high school graduates (or drop outs) who had never been to a college, the working-class parents feel keenly their lack of social standing and educational training in their visits with teachers. (p. 171)

On the contrary, the working-class parents from Thurber judged teachers harshly. At the end of the spring 1993 term, for example, Mrs. Longman told me of all the problems Neal had had with his teacher that year. She and her husband had discovered—only when the first report card arrived—that Neal hadn't been turning in all his homework. Mrs. Longman and her husband met with Neal's teacher, who suggested a scheme to coerce compliance by increasing surveillance: Neal would have to write out his homework assignment each night, then Mrs. Longman would sign it and have his father sign it. Neal, his mother recalled, was "tore up. The first day he come home with it—'Dumb homework folder!'—I mean, he was just really upset."

Neal's dad also grew quickly disenchanted with the idea and was puzzled by the notes Neal's teacher was sending home ("Crazy," he called them); perhaps he realized that he too had become an object of surveillance under the system of sign-offs. The Longmans had also been highly offended to hear from their daughter, a high school student who'd been doing volunteer work in the school, that Neal's teacher called her

students "brats" in the teachers' lounge. At the time of our interview, Mrs. Longman told me:

> I hate that he's had to continue on. I really wanted to pull him out of Thurber. I really did. And I don't think my husband fully understood until this came up. I mean, he's been involved with the kids, and he cares about them and their education, but it's always been up to me to take care of them. And I told him, "I've had enough of Neal being upset. I've had enough of trying to sit down and talk to the teacher: your turn." So he took over, and he did it. And now I'm telling Neal: "27 more days. Just hang in there 27 more days." I mean, we're counting down the days off the calendar! Just because I want him to get through fifth grade—basically away from that and up to middle school.

Mrs. Longman's depiction of Neal's teacher doesn't suggest that she accepted the teacher's views or that they were too complex for her to understand. Rather, her actions provided an example of what Scott (1985) called the resistances of the "weak," where, "allowing always for the exceptional moments of uncontrolled anger or desperation" (pp. 286–287), weaker parties act publicly in the ways powerholders expect, but privately, in the company of peers, nurse their discontents.

The question, then, is how disagreements and resistances become open rather than remaining hidden. To unpack a text like the parents' letter, we must examine the historical and spatial processes that shaped school–community relations in such ways that some parents challenged or acquiesced, took voice or remained silent, banded together or acted alone. These issues can't be addressed without looking further at the histories and networks of relations that structured parents' interactions with the school.

THURBER AT THE INTERSECTION OF CITY AND COMMUNITY POLITICS

Schools have social histories. In some communities they function as centers of activity—sites of critical local events and ceremonies—and symbolize the shared experiences of the people who attended them. We're most likely to think of high schools in these terms, but elementary schools have their places in community memory as well. Thurber was an important symbol in the working-class European American neighborhood that surrounded it. One of the oldest schools in the city, it was for years *the* school for the neighborhood.[4] The first civic league for the area mutated into a parent–teachers association (PTA) in 1921 and

[4]The remainder of this paragraph draws on a privately published community history of the neighborhood around Thurber. I omit an explicit citation in an attempt to preserve the anonymity of the area.

shortly afterward began working with the county to build the school. When the school board refused to put up all the money to buy land for the school and to put in a sewer, the PTA assumed part of the debt and paid it off with money raised through community suppers. Throughout the 1920s, community members, through the PTA, stocked the school with equipment and supplies. As the area grew, the school itself expanded from 4 to 14 rooms and became a source of stability for the community. Thurber had only three principals from 1928 to 1981, and the faculty was relatively stable. A community historian, writing in the early 1980s, could claim that two or three generations of neighborhood residents had moved through the same classrooms.

Over the years, however, other schools had opened near Thurber. As the city's population stagnated and shifted to the suburbs, the neighborhood aged, and enrollments at schools like Thurber dropped. Rumors of school closings began to circulate. Finally, in October 1986, the school district's long-range planning committee recommended closing five neighborhood schools with old facilities, relatively small enrollments, and costs disproportionately higher than other schools in the district (Jones, 1986a; 1986b).[5]

There was immediate resistance. The PTAs of the affected schools, along with neighborhood associations and the City Council itself, opposed the closings. According to a newspaper account, the president of one neighborhood council argued: "The schools 'play a key role in maintaining the fabric' of the city. 'The periodic suggestions of closing schools...injects a degree of instability' in Roanoke....This leads to families settling outside the city limits" (Jones, 1986c, p. B6).

A city council member suggested that Superintendent Tota knew full well it was politically impossible to close the schools and had simply maneuvered the planning committee into making such a recommendation to, in effect, blackmail City Council into increasing the school budget. Tota denied this suggestion (Jones, 1986d), but he did acknowledge that closing the schools was an economic decision: Declining enrollments in the city system had meant a loss in state funds, and the aging schools were simply too expensive to keep open. The closings were portrayed as unpleasant but necessary moves:

> The public should remember that "for five years, the School Board and I have devoted energy to keeping schools open," Tota said....As more low-income children have entered Roanoke's schools, Tota said, the schools have to meet needs throughout the city. Some schools may need additional staff to help with the special problems posed by disadvantaged kids, he said. (Jones, 1986d, p. A8)

[5]The long-range planning committee was a group of roughly 40 members, with indefinite appointments, who helped formulate policy for the school division. In 1991 a newly appointed school board member, Wendy O'Neil, complained that the group was dominated by a "'very close circle' from the wealthy South and Southwest quadrant of the city" who accounted for more than half the board's membership (Thompson, 1991, p. B4). By contrast, only 2 of the 42 members came from Thurber's quadrant. O'Neil was not reappointed to the school board when her 3-year term expired, apparently a result of her "outspokeness" (Turner, 1994b, p. C1).

A month later, in the face of continuing opposition to the closings, Tota suggested that the only way to keep the schools open would be to remodel them completely, by passing a $10.7 million bond issue. Even as he made this proposal, Tota warned that in preserving neighborhood schools the district still needed to act to reduce social divisions in the city:

> "Unless classism, social, economic and racial issues are addressed in a positive fashion, they may forecast the 'white' and 'bright' flight evident in many larger cities in Virginia and throughout the nation," Tota told the [school] board....Tota's comprehensive plan is a delicate balancing act with the city's past and future. He wants to deal with housing patterns that have thwarted efforts to bring black and white students together while simultaneously honoring Roanoke's tradition of neighborhood schools. (Jones, 1987, p. A1)

Ironically, as I suggest in the next chapter, Tota's rhetoric of "disadvantaged kids" and fiscal crisis may have actually helped fuel county residents' fears of the city's racial diversity and economic stresses. In the short run, however, it was politically effective. A bond issue, including money for school renovations, passed in the fall of 1987.

Presumably in an attempt to address some of the class and racial issues Tota had warned of, the openings and closings of schools for remodeling coincided with changes in the boundaries of school attendance zones. Thurber's zone was expanded. Instead of drawing all its students from the surrounding European American neighborhood, the school now also drew students from two other areas in the city, both populated by African American families. Parents from the three segments of the attendance zone had different patterns of school participation.

The African American parents were not active in the PTA and were not among the "concerned parents" who authored the letter of protest. In part, this fact might have been a consequence of geography. The African American parents of Thurber students lived miles from the school in a city that lacked adequate public transportation. Mr. Watts and the teachers had briefly tried holding meetings at one of the apartment complexes where many of the school's African American students lived, but the effort was short lived. As Mrs. West recalled, "One of the reasons that we didn't get much momentum to do it again was that we'd go and one or two parents would show up. Out of a whole housing project." During my two years in the school, no meetings like this took place.

Even more than geography, the social atmosphere at the school might have made African American parents feel less than welcome. Most parents were European Americans and had a proprietary attitude toward Thurber. There were two African American teachers at the school at the beginning of my fieldwork; but neither had sworn fealty to Mr. Watts or embraced the novel-based curriculum, and by the end of my fieldwork both had asked for transfers to other schools.

The situation for many of the European American parents living around the school was strikingly different. Thurber had been *their* school for decades. In a group interview, about a dozen now-retired community members—former Thurber teachers, former students, and parents of former students—recalled a different relationship between school and community. Children, one person said, "didn't [act up] back then like they do now. There was no comparison." Mrs. Soltan, whose children had attended Thurber, explained: "A lot of it was the attitude of the child and the parent. The parents because [agreement from others in group] if you don't behave you're going to get it at home. That had a lot to do with it."

"We'd call for conferences," recalled Mrs. Mendes, a former teacher.

"The type of child changed with busing," Mrs. Sansome added. "When your children went to Thurber they were all neighborhood children."

"They walked there," Mrs. Goodman, a former student at Thurber and a parent of students, pointed out.

"Yeah, they walked there," Mrs. Sansome agreed, and added, "With busing you got a different group of children. And you got children who didn't have two-parent families, and it was a whole different ballgame."

Mrs. Hayes, who'd been a student at Thurber, suggested:

> A lot of this, talking about discipline, goes back to the parents and the family. I knew if I got in trouble at Thurber or any other school that what they meted out was nothing compared to what the discipline I was going to get when I got home. [*Laughter*] It's because my mother had also taught school.

This shift from a situation where the European American parents saw themselves as the sole clientele of the school, a unified group sharing social capital and child-rearing attitudes, to one where they shared the school with little-known African American *Others,* was coupled to a second change in school–community relations: a shift from a situation where teachers and parents lived close to and knew each other to one where they lived apart, didn't know one another, and seemingly had different concepts of schooling.

Until the 1980s, most Thurber teachers had been either neighborhood residents or were known to parents through long tenure at the school. Teachers and parents belonged to the same social networks—or at least had access to one another through these networks. Mrs. Sansome, one

of the community volunteers I interviewed, was a former Thurber teacher (her children also attended there), who had lived five blocks from the school. Similarly, Mrs. Mendes taught at Thurber while living "just a block away." Mrs. Joyce, who'd been a student at Thurber and later a parent whose kids attended the school, remembered that her sixth-grade teacher had "lived over on Weston Street [about eight blocks from the school] up through there....Ms. Riley lived on Trenton Street [a few blocks from the school]. Ms. Webster lived out here. Ms. Hudson lived out here." Mrs. Mendes added that "the principal lived right down the street at Trenton Street."

By the time of my fieldwork, none of the teachers lived in the neighborhoods served by the school, and the faculty had become much less stable. Mrs. Sansome recalled: "During the 12 years that I taught at Thurber, for about 10 of them we did not have a change in faculty members. We were a very stable faculty. It was only in the last two years [which would have been when Tota arrived as superintendent, that things changed]." One teacher, the community members marveled, taught at the school for 41 years, in the same classroom. By contrast, during my 2 years at the school about one third of the faculty changed.

This affinity and continuity between the school and its working-class constituency had been nourished by clear lines of participation open to parents. All the retired community members I interviewed who'd been parents of Thurber students had been in the PTA, and in Mrs. Sansome's words, "I guess all of us were room mothers." Room mothers organized parties for kids and brought refreshments for the class.

Mrs. Joyce pointed out the contrast: In the old days at Thurber parents were constantly in the classroom, organizing parties for all sorts of reasons. Now, "they can only have one party a year. It used to be they had parties all year long. Every holiday just about" ["And children's birthdays," another parent interpolated] "you did something for the class."

Having birthday parties for all the kids meant that even if only a few parents actually participated, the community and community functions had been frequently acknowledged and literally celebrated at school. Now, however, there were only two parties during the year—on Valentine's Day and just before the Christmas break—and parents were rarely in the classrooms. The commonalities that community members and school staff had once shared had now evaporated. And all of this took place in a school where a decade of school system politics had increasingly marginalized parents and community members from a close and active role. This withering of once close school–community ties in a context where community members still felt some ownership of the school was a major reason, I think, that the collective discontent of the European American parents came into the open at Thurber.

But I do not want to give the impression that the protesting European American parents were a homogeneous group. The protest brought together both long-term residents of the area and more recent arrivals. The former helped articulate a logic of strong parent ties to the school, grounded in the school's historical embeddedness in the neighborhood, and enrolled the more recent arrivals, who were also dissatisfied with Thurber on the basis of comparisons to other schools, into an oppositional structure similar to what Fantasia (1988, 1995) called a "culture of solidarity":

> Expressed in emergent values, behaviors, and organizational forms, these "cultures of solidarity" indicated that collective "consciousness" may be bound fairly tightly to the strategic encounter that has given rise to it, and thus such cultural processes can be seen as relatively independent of the previously existing ideas and beliefs of individual participants. (Fantasia, 1995, p. 280)

In other words, instead of looking at the parent protest as something flowing from the well-formed, pre-existing outlook of a stable group, we should look at the group itself, as well as its outlooks on the core issues, as emerging in the course of the dispute (and then likely evaporating in its aftermath). The weakening of parent–school ties in the school system, the history of Thurber in the surrounding neighborhood, the feelings of ownership on the part of some parents, and the visible contrast between Thurber's practices and those of surrounding schools all intersected with a tenuously implemented curriculum and an uncertain and divided staff.

The protest, then, was not a simple reflex of "traditional" parents resisting "progressive" innovations; it was a historically conditioned protest by a heterogeneous group that, as I show later, had a distinctive spatiotemporal orientation to the school.

MR. WATTS'S RESPONSE TO THE LETTER

I saw the parents' protest letter only on the first Friday in March, 5 weeks after it was sent. When Watts pulled me into his office that morning to show it to me, he seemed mainly puzzled:

> I think in several of these, one of the things that I would like to do is say, "What did you mean?" "What were you thinking?" For example, the one about the weekly student progress and the lesson plans? What did they really mean by that? What they've stated here I don't think they really mean. And I think rather than pouncing on this particular statement, I first need to say, "Now, go back and tell me what you really mean about this."...They [the teachers] are not going to send lesson plans home. I'll say that right up front. And you are not going to see a progress report every week. Those things I don't mind just saying....But, I want to deal with these honestly. And honestly may mean me saying. "You're right; we need to change this," or "You're wrong; we're not going to change it," or "You are partially right, and we need to come to an agreement."

Mr. Watts's plan was to present the letter to the teachers at the next week's regularly scheduled Wednesday afternoon staff meeting and then to hold a public meeting the following night to respond to the parents. He asked me to come to the meetings and audiorecord them—in part so that, if necessary, he could "go back and listen to their comments and have something to fall back on to help us understand what they're saying."

Thus the next Thursday I set up my recorder in the school gymnasium where Mr. Watts, the fifth grade teachers,[6] and a group of 35 or 40 parents, many of whom came and went as the meeting dragged on, talked for about 3½ hours. Mr. Watts began the meeting with a 35-minute lecture on his philosophy of learning and then opened the discussion to parents. Although several spoke strongly in support of what the school was doing, the majority voiced concerns. Rather than giving a blow-by-blow description of the meeting, I synthesize the perspective the protesting parents articulated and compare it with the perspective from which the teachers and Mr. Watts seemed to operate.

Studies on parent involvement have suggested that a core difference between parents and teachers is that the former have a "particularistic" standpoint and think principally about their own kids in all their complexity whereas teachers have a "universalistic" standpoint and look at groups of students and at only some of their characteristics (e.g., Lareau, 1989; Lightfoot, 1978). At Thurber, however, both teachers and parents switched back and forth between particularistic and universalistic discourses, and other fundamental differences in parent and teacher perspectives surfaced. In particular, parents and teachers at Thurber mapped education differently in

[6]The fifth-grade teachers were the only teachers at this meeting, in part because much of the tension was over whether students going from fifth to sixth grade were adequately prepared. Mr. Watts asked the fifth-grade teachers to survey middle school faculty on how well prepared Thurber students were compared to students from other elementaries. The teachers apparently checked on a number of recent graduates who were now at the middle school in the European American neighborhood (they didn't survey the two other middle schools that African American students leaving the school attended) and reported that Thurber students were doing well indeed—in direct contradiction to parents' reports based on their knowledge about their own children. Another reason that only fifth-grade teachers were asked to attend the meeting may have been that it made it easier for the school to avoid showing teachers' differences of opinion.

space and time; the two groups fit kids' performances into different networks or circuits.

CIRCUITS AND FIELDS

By *circuits* I mean the networks of practices that orient people within arenas of institutional life. *Institutions,* in this sense:

> can be described as *cultural accounts* under whose authority action occurs and social units claim their standing. The term *account* here takes on a double meaning. Institutions are descriptions of reality, explanations of what is and what is not, what can be and what cannot. They are accounts of how the world works, and they make it possible to find order in a world that is disorderly. At the same time, in the Western rationalizing process, institutions are structured accounting systems that show how social units and their actions accumulate value...and generate progress and justice on an ongoing basis. (Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1994, p. 25 [italics original])

Institutions are mapped across networks of organizations. One way to talk about these networks is to say that they constitute *organizational fields* consisting of "those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products" (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148).

But what gets "recognized" as an "area of institutional life" depends on the observer's standpoint as well as on the interactions of organizational participants. The location of an organization in an organizational field is a social construction. That is, people from different standpoints looking at or participating in a setting such as Thurber Elementary—parents and teachers, for example—can see it as connected to different networks, can fit it into different cultural accounts, can understand its accounting practices in different ways. The sociologists just quoted, for example, produced work on the administrative and fiscal structures of schools and school districts (e.g., Scott & Meyer, 1994), but their maps of the organizational fields of public education bear little resemblance to those of parents, teachers, or kids. Indeed, these groups do not even appear on the sociologists' maps. The "organizational fields" the researchers described are only a few among many that could be defined by differently positioned participants. I'm not suggesting that circuits can be defined willy-nilly, or that participants necessarily disagree about the existence of organizational linkages. Rather, what varies is the importance participants attach to links and their explanations of the meanings of the linkages.

For Thurber parents, the school was a point on their kids' pathways to graduation and adulthood, one that played a key role in comparing

and ranking kids to prepare them for different futures. Grades were mobile ways of representing kids that could move from one level of school to another and could be combined, averaged, and used for comparison and ranking. For some Thurber teachers, on the other hand, school was a workplace where they tried to perform as experts before an audience of students, peers, and possibly unfriendly district administrators. Grading practices were modes of communication directed toward students (as formative feedback on work), but they were also signs of a professional stance that linked the teachers using them to national movements of teacher professionalism and school reform.

Parents' Circuit: Comparison and Ranking

Case studies of parental opposition to school change have generally treated opposition as a technical problem, the product of political or organizational practices that fail to involve parents or community segments adequately in the change-planning process, or fail to monitor and address parental concerns emerging in the course of change (Gold & Miles, 1981; Smith & Keith, 1971). Other studies have focused on the ideological or cultural characteristics of parent groups which supposedly make them resistant to change (Moffett, 1988). By contrast, I suggest that something more than lack of involvement or ideological inertia produced the parents' resistance. Schools fit in different ways into the life trajectories of parents and teachers, and each group develops different vested interests in schooling and different ways of conceptualizing it. Instead of thinking only of their relations to a particular school (e.g., Epstein, 1995; Fine, 1993), Thurber parents oriented themselves to the *sequence* of their kids' schools. The parents' complaints about the system of representation embedded in the school's grading scale reflected their concern about how their kids' achievements would be mobilized and moved through that sequence. The judgments of curriculum and teaching that produced the letter of protest were grounded in comparative logics.

The parents' circuit, then, was the chain of school settings—elementary, middle, and high school—through which kids moved. Their movement was physical—kids traversed a sequence of spatial, temporal, and regulatory regimes that corresponded to a culturally constructed maturing of the body—and symbolic, in the sense that kids were translated into stable and mobile representations (grades, test scores), forms of institutionalized cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that could be aggregated over time and used to rank kids, separate them, and connect them to the institutional identities that would shape the directions of their lives. The dual definition of institutions as cultural accounts and accounting systems meshed here: Parents saw schools as accounts of

how kids matured and took their places in society (i.e., the school sorted them into appropriate paths and futures) and as accounting mechanisms (producing grades and test scores) to explain and legitimize this sorting.

This view may seem odd to those of us accustomed to looking at things from a teacher's standpoint. At a school like Thurber, a regular classroom teacher's acquaintance with kids generally begins and ends within a single school year. The histories of students in earlier grades and their fates in later grades are hidden. Only conversations with other teachers or their own experiences teaching in other situations give teachers a sense of how their classrooms relate to those of other grades or other schools. Mrs. Court, for example, recalled moving up a grade with the same group of students:

> in my experience, having taught third grade and then moved up to fourth grade, it's kind of humbling. You know what you taught them in third grade, you know what they've had, so you expect certain things. But, it's really eye-opening to see what they really remember, and how you really have to take so many steps back.

If teachers had visited other rooms in their building or at other schools, they would have been even more startled by the sharp contrasts in teaching and curriculum. Sociologists have talked of such discontinuities as aspects of the "loose coupling" of educational organizations—the way organizational units function independently of one another although they may be tightly linked in symbolic and ceremonial ways (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Weick, 1976). But such discontinuities are not natural features of schools; they are the results of policies and practices limiting communications among teachers. And if schools are loosely coupled, they are so only from the perspectives of administrators and teachers. Parents do not see them the same way.

As I've said, at Thurber the parents I talked to saw schooling as a cross-grade, multischool process in which kids moved from kindergarten through twelfth-grade education along a single trajectory stretching toward adulthood. Many parents saved their kids' papers and tests and compared the work from different grades and teachers. Mrs. Longman, for example, told me that Neal wasn't keeping a journal in fifth grade:

> They used to have to keep a journal. In the third grade and fourth grade. And I've still got his journals. I hold on to that stuff. Because Neal wants me to keep every paper anyway. But when I feel like it's important, I stash them away. I like to get them out and take a look at them.

Other Thurber parents were already thinking about which middle schools and high schools they wanted their kids to attend. Mrs. Kaiser,

for example, was planning to send Earl to a high school in the neighboring county system:

> Well, I don't have firsthand knowledge, but most of the people that I've talked to that have their kids in high school are in schools in the county. They seem like they've got a better—I don't know—they seem like they learn a lot more. And they're more advanced than the ones in the city.

Many of the parents' misgivings about the curriculum and the grading scale at Thurber were grounded in worries about the unorthodox marking system's affect on placements in middle school "tracking systems" (cf. Oakes, 1985). Mr. Dodd, the father of a fourth grader, was already aware (although he had no older kids) that the middle school used a traditional grading scale and tracking:

> The grading scale here [at Thurber] is quite wide, in my opinion. Now, when you go to middle school, not only is it lettered and not only is it numbered, but it seems to me that it's very much more pointed, and you're either in this group, or you're not. Now, there's got to be some adjustment, not only to the students, but to the parents as well, I mean, my gosh. . . .

Many of the parents had expressed similar concerns in interviews I'd conducted a year earlier. Mrs. Hunt, for example, had told me:

> We had parents last year that threatened to pull them [their kids] out of school, and a couple ladies did....And I tried to encourage them to stay, and what wonderful things we had, and they said, "I'm not gonna wait 9 weeks to know what's going on, and then find Ns when my child has done better work than this in another school." And so there, again, there needs to be more continuity between the feeder schools that send them down here, and here.

"The grading system they have here in the city," Mr. Hunt added, "they're not continuous [between schools] so you've got a problem for the child as well as the parent."

Mrs. Longman, talking about her son Neal, made a similar point in expressing her displeasure with Thurber's system:

> But what does it do to them when they go to sixth grade? That's my question. What happens to Neal when he goes from here to middle school, and nothing's changed in middle school? It's still the same grading system, still the same teaching. What happens then? "Oh, it's being changed, it's being changed"—yeah! There are three schools in the city of Roanoke that's doing different things, right? All the rest of them are still—oh well! Get me started! I have to cool off!!

At a meeting of the report card revision committee in the summer of 1994, Mrs. Fine, an African American parent, asked in wonder:

> Is it just okay—doesn't the school system like work together, okay? So I notice that Thurber has changed, but a lot of the other schools haven't changed, going to the Ms, Ts, and Ns! So, can one school just actually up and change the grading system just like that?...So, do the different schools do whatever they want?

"They do different things," answered Mr. Watts.

This kind of answer frustrated parents enormously. At the meeting with Mr. Watts in March of 1994, Mrs. Massey had suggested that Thurber and the other schools get together and sort things out:

> I have one suggestion. Since we are in the city district, and there are a lot of parents that have concerns about their children's education. This system seems to have apparently worked really well. Maybe what we should do is possibly maybe get a lot of the teachers and parents from several different schools all together, to discuss what's going on, what's happened through the system, see how many parents really start thinking about it and really understand it and really agree with it, to see if we can just get it all across the board, every school. That way, we wouldn't have any problem with it.

But such collaboration across schools was inconsistent both with the political structure of the school system, with its independent principalships, and with the tightly bounded, inward focus of the faculty at Thurber. Mr. Watts and the teachers framed their activities within the boundaries of *their* school and resisted (and resented) comparisons with other schools. As Mr. Watts insisted during the meeting with parents (in a discussion of standardized test scores): "We cannot compare Thurber School to Pumpkin Hill [an elementary school in an affluent section of town]. Okay, they're not the same. If we compare apples to apples, we perform as well or, or better."

Although it might seem obvious to educators that school outcomes can't be compared because schools deal with different students, operate under different constraints, and draw on different resources—a perspective that focuses on differences in inputs—parents focused on outcomes and from that position countered that their kids should be doing as well as any others in the system. The Thurber parents could and did compare schools on the basis of their standardized test scores (which were published in the local newspaper), on the basis of their own experiences with different schools, and especially on the basis of anecdotes about other schools that friends from church or work told them.

It might be useful, in fact, to think of parents as participating in what Moll and some of his colleagues refer to as "funds of knowledge," household-centered social networks across which families share essential resources, skills, and information (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994; Moll, Tapia, & Whitmore, 1993; cf. Smith & Tardanico, 1987, pp. 100–101). Because Moll and his colleagues are mainly concerned with the experiences of working-class Mexican American families struggling to survive in unstable labor markets, they've tended to focus on funds centered on "social, economic, and productive activities" (Moll, Tapia, & Whitmore, 1993, p. 160) and they've generally viewed household funds of knowledge as ordinarily segregated from school-based activity.

The protesting Thurber parents, however, also working class but situated in a relatively stable labor market, were participants in funds or networks organized at least in part around reproductive activities such as schooling itself. The parents had social networks across which they shared information about school practices, networks composed, for example, of friends and neighbors whose kids had other teachers or went to other schools; of teachers from other schools who went to their churches; of knowledgeable casual acquaintences (e.g., Mrs. Longman had struck up an acquaintance with a central office administrator who attended her Weight Watchers class); and finally of the PTA itself. The networks were sources of information that helped parents make decisions about what middle and high schools their kids should attend and what preparation was needed for school at those levels, and also allowed them to situate Thurber within a larger organizational field.

An A–B–C–D–F marking system fit neatly into the parents' comparative logic by letting them compare their kids to others (or at least to a mythical average kid represented by a C grade—mythical because the assumption that grades are distributed on the same bases across schools is untenable; see Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1994). These rankings could be taken as "objective" representations of students' abilities since they were based on a clear referent: the percentages of kids' correct answers on standardized, textbook-based tasks. Parents could thus assume that the rankings were reliable predictors of how the kids should do in later grades.

The alternative marking system introduced at Thurber disrupted these assumptions. Instead of marks based on percentages of right answers, the kids received codes based on the complex and unarticulated judgments of teachers. Grades were transformed from referential terms to shifters, indexical terms whose meanings depended on which teacher was using them in what context. Parents could no longer look over student work, check to see what scores their kids made, and then praise or cajole them as need be. The move to the literature-based curriculum turned schoolwork into a black box for parents and made them depend on teachers to tell them when things were going right or wrong.

As one result, marks ceased to appear *objective* and instead seemed more like choices made by teachers rather than mirrors of kids' abilities. Hence, when parents saw marks they thought unsatisfactory, their complaints went not to their kids, but to the teachers. By the same token, as the grades now appeared to be teacher rather than child

produced, parents could no longer use them for comparison or for a gauge of future performance. The aura of objectivity once attached to grades had helped legitimize unequal outcomes, but many parents now saw the M–T–N system as an unnatural attempt to mask the "natural" inequalities among students. Thus Mr. Hereford could complain:

> I accept the, the...the equality of this process, but you have a class of fourth graders, and some, as you said, are working at a, a, higher level of accomplishment; they have developed further, maybe, in one area, maybe in all the areas, versus the others. Now, I understand you all have to test these kids at certain periods in their education now—but at what point do you come to a conclusion, a rational, logical maybe not altogether what seems like a fair conclusion, that basically if you put these children with these children—I think you hope that if these children who are not developing quite as fast stay with this group, it'll help them develop a little faster. I think many are sensing that the opposite is happening now. That to create this equality we are bringing about a learning-down.

At issue here was the question of whether the school was trying to promote a social agenda—creating "equality" among the students—that was overriding what some parents saw as its true educational function: creating differences. This is an issue that resonated with larger political debates going on in the state during this time.

Political Linkages

The literature-based curriculum, and the complex grading practices introduced with it, disrupted the assumption of a normal distribution of talent which schools should reinforce through their grades. As far as parents were concerned, teachers weren't there to make personal judgments about kids or to build their self-esteem; they were there to teach the "basics" and neutrally report on the kids' differential performances on straightforward tasks. Mr. Dodd, for example, complained that kids needed to be drilled more on their multiplication tables, and Mrs. Grigsby wondered why the teachers didn't just make the kids use correct spellings and punctuation the first time around rather than making them rewrite their work.

The old textbook–worksheet system had defined a small but clear role for parents in the basics-oriented curriculum. The steady stream of graded material going home from school allowed parents to monitor what their kids were doing, support the teachers' assignments, and reward or punish kids for their performances. There was a regular, albeit a very assymetrical, communication loop between school and home. In the new curriculum, by contrast, communication was more ambiguous

and much less regular, and parents' roles and opportunities for participation were much less clear.

The parents' emphases on teaching the basics and ranking students and their demands for improved lines of information from school to home thus might have grown partly from their traditional expectations based on their own experiences as students. I want to suggest, however, that the political climate of the time gave resonance and depth to their expectations and encouraged parents to publicly articulate their differences with the educators at Thurber. The parents' letter of complaint was drafted only weeks after George Allen, a conservative Republican with ties to the Christian right, had been elected governor. Allen had easily carried the European American neighborhoods around Thurber (flyers supporting him were distributed outside PTA meetings during the campaign), although he lost in the African American neighborhoods by a 10 to 1 margin.[7]

Allen's campaign had emphasized "parental rights," charter schools, and voucher programs. He had promised a return to the basics and a new battery of standardized tests, to be administered every other year, as a way of making schools more "accountable." And true to his word, a year into his term, Allen began to push through revisions in state curriculum guidelines which favored skill drills and rote memorization, especially in the areas of Language Arts and Social Studies. This conservative mindset on education is exemplified in a 1994 speech given at a public meeting in Roanoke County to discuss the new curriculum guidelines. The speaker was a retired university professor and local Christian Coalition leader who supported the governor's standards:

> When I went to teach [college] in 1981, I expected my students to be as well prepared as I was when I went to University. And I was shocked, I was shocked to find out that their math was atrocious. They didn't know what the area of a circle was or how many feet in a yard—things like that. Now, that's memory, but believe me, it's useful, okay? [*Applause*]....There's nothing wrong with memorizing things! Anything you've ever learned is by repetition. Watch a little baby learn how to walk? How do they do it?

[7]One side issue worth noting is that the lieutenant governor candidate on Allen's Republican ticket was Mike Farris, an ultraconservative with strong ties to the Christian right. Farris had publicly called the public school system a "godless monstrosity" and after losing the election, had become head of the Home School Legal Defense Fund. In this role, in June of 1995, he led an attack on a Federal Trade Commission action against the makers of the Hooked on Phonics program. Not all protesting Thurber parents agreed with Farris—Allen carried the neighborhoods around the school, but Farris lost them. But Farris's grounds for supporting phonics and for attacking whole language clearly showed that parental control issues were at the heart of the debate. For Farris and others, phonics was a technique that parents could use at home (either in conjunction with school instruction or in home schooling). Whole language, by contrast, centered power in the hands of teachers and excluded parents, unless roles for them were explicitly built into the curriculum. The only roles educators at Thurber allocated to parents were listening to their kids read and signing a homework folder each night.

> They try and try again, right?...Repetition, repetition. If that's rote memory, tough! That's how you learn!! [*Applause*] Anyway, I found out that these students of mine...they could not write. Their spelling was atrocious. This so-called invented spelling is just for the birds [*Amens from the audience*]. When you learn to read, you learn to spell. And that's with basic systematic phonics! The look-say, whole language method has been a disaster in this country [*Applause*].

How many of Thurber parents would have endorsed this view I can't say, but there were many anticipations of it in their public objections to the curriculum.

Having adopted a literature-based curriculum and a kind of portfolio evaluation, the staff at Thurber thus found itself at odds with this ascendant conservative movement. They had moved far from rote learning and memorization and had positioned themselves as the sole agents of judgment in instructional matters. And although they probably did not intend to, they had essentially excluded parents from the schooling process. For if parents understood schooling within a circuit that traced students' movements across grade levels, the circuit that Mr. Watts and most of the teachers worked within, as I explain in the next section, was one that supported the notion of teachers as autonomous experts whose judgments on curriculum and assessment should simply be accepted. From the school perspective, parental resistance seemed to stem mainly from ignorance. At the meeting held to air parents' complaints, Mrs. Moon, who had let it be known that she was praying for her child's teacher, asked if parents could just vote on whether to go back to the old grading system. Mr. Watts replied: "I would say, we would like to educate first, and then we can have a vote. But we would like the opportunity to educate everyone on why we do it the way we do it."

Mrs. Moon shot back:

> Well, for three years, this has been educating, and parents still don't understand it, and I'm one of them. Because my daughter went from here, to middle school, and she was unprepared, and astounded as to what she had to face when she got there. And I know Mrs. Hunt felt the same way. I've had my child crying, upset. What I'm saying—just like this gentleman was saying in the back—they are going to go on to 6th, 7th, 8th, on to 12th, and they are going to face life. They're not going to have fantasyland where somebody's going to say, "I'd like to see how your tone of voice is." They're going to say, "I want to see what you can do."

The challenge here was directed beyond the grading system itself and implied the parents' unwillingness to accept the notion, at the core of the teachers' circuit, that teachers should determine what was to be mastered and when it had been mastered.

The Teachers' Circuit

Whereas parents wanted their kids reduced to stable, combinable representations that could move through a local network of schools, the teachers at Thurber wanted to describe students with complex and unstable representations (portfolios, for example), whose networks of circulation were unclear. On the one hand, the portfolios were supposed to move in a very tight loop between teacher, student, and parent as formative assessments; on the other hand, assessments like portfolios linked the teachers and what they were doing to a disciplinary vision of teaching as an expert, professional practice.

The teachers' circuit was defined by their relation to an idea of pedagogy in which kids worked in groups, worked on integrated strands of curriculum, and were formatively assessed on complex products like stories or poems rather than on worksheets or simple tests. These ideas separated teachers from the community and connected them to national movements in educational reform and pedagogy. In the language of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1985), Mr. Watts and the teachers were redefining the *field* (a term analogous to my use of *circuit*) of educational practice. The traditional grading system was directed to a general audience of parents; the new curriculum and grading systems had a different ideal audience, one composed of other educators and educational researchers. I was more representative of the ideal audience for the new grading system than were the parents of kids in the school. I came from the university, was a vocal proponent of whole language and portfolio assessment, and had actively supported some of the school's innovations (by donating books like First, Kellog, Almeida, & Gray's *The Good Common School,* 1991, to the faculty, giving several teachers copies of books like Routman's *Invitations,* [1991], and later circulating articles about Kohn's [1993] work [Miller, 1994] on the problems of using grades as external incentives).

A circuit orienting teachers to an idealized, theory-based pedagogy helped create and sustain a definition of *teacher* as pedagogical expert. Teachers were supposedly self-sufficient constructors of instructional settings, the principal mediators of students' interactions with curricular materials (as opposed to the more traditional definition of teachers as transmitters of the knowledge encoded in textbooks). I do not suggest that all the teachers at Thurber thought they were experts in this sense; some were quite unsure of themselves. But this language and concept of expertise limited teachers' ways of talking about themselves and the public roles they could assume. As experts, for example, they should already know how to do wonderful, creative, inventive activities and use holistic assessment practices to make sense of students' performances on complex tasks. Most teachers, however, had neither the training nor

the immediate support to develop such strategies and, like Mrs. Court, felt simultaneously frustrated and guilty.

At the same time, the definition of teaching as expertise suggested that teachers should be left alone, beyond the interference of parents or administrators. The teachers saw parents' attempts to participate as challenges to this pedagogical autonomy, and many of their responses to parent complaints seemed to be simple restatements of their expertise. At the meeting to address the letter of complaint, for example, Mr. Watts began his response this way:

> [*Reading the parents' first comment*] "While we are receptive to the philosophy that it promotes a positive self-esteem, we are concerned that the current grading scale is not wide enough to closely evaluate a student's progress." Any questions? I would be glad to tell you what we think and why we do what we do. And that's *very* simple. There's really nothing hard about it. Our thinking is, when a child has *mastered what we want him to master,* then let's say he has mastered it.

Such assertions of monopolies on relevant knowledge are a common feature of expert or professional claims to power (Freidson, 1970; Welker, 1991). But casting teachers as the sole arbiters of curriculum and evaluation raised tensions among the teachers as well as between them and the parents. Expertise and professionalism garner much of their legitimacy from the idea that professional judgments reflect collectively produced knowledge and not individual, idiosyncratic decisions. At Thurber, however, there were no opportunities for the discussion and debate that might have produced shared understandings. Instead, teachers worried in private about making assessment judgments and defending them to parents. "Math is easy," one teacher explained to me:

> 'Cause they either get a math problem right or they get it wrong. But in their writing I'm not keeping checklists. Like Mrs. Peel, she's very organized. She keeps points—like a point system—kids get certain points for doing certain things, and if they don't do it or didn't do a good job, they lose points. So she can back that up, so it's not a problem with the parents. I can't back up—a lot of what I'm saying about the kids and where they are, because I don't have any records. The only records I have is their work. So, I need to really—I have to have time. But I don't know how! I used to take a stack of papers home and I would grade them, and make marks on them. And now I don't want to make marks on the papers if I'm not going to grade them, give them M, T, or N, whatever, on their writing, really. You know, I need to conference with them, and I need to, when I talk to them, I need to take notes. So that makes me uncomfortable....I don't know what I'll show [parents]—if they want to see where I'm getting my Ms and Ts, I don't know.

At the March protest meeting, Mrs. Hereford raised this issue of inconsistency by pointing to situations where kids in the same class got the same grades for different levels of performance:

> If you have children, say I have a child that's in math, she's learning pretty good, and she gets on her grading a "masters." Okay, and my next door neighbor, her child is in the same classroom as my child, and gets the same grade as my child. And the two of them, one's learning more and does better, and the other one is slightly less. But they're both getting "masters." Then how—how do you compare that?

Mr. Watts could only respond by again insisting on the teacher's expertise and autonomy:

> The only way that you could try to explain that, what you're speaking of, is that the teacher who observes what went on in the classroom, based on what's in the child's portfolio, made that determination. That they both had mastered the material.

Mrs. Hereford responded:

> But at the same time, that's not letting the parents know exactly where their children are, like A, B, C—you know, when we were graded when we were young, our parents knew exactly where we were in our activities at school. We either got A, B, C, D, or F. Here, there's only three. So we don't really know exactly where our children stand as far as their education goes.

When parents questioned teachers' practices by constrasting them to practices at other schools or by contrasting the evaluations of their kids with performances of kids from other schools, their comments were not treated as reasonable questions or concerns but were seen as challenges to the teachers' claims of expertise. Yet the faculty as a whole was unable to agree on its response. For example, in one teachers' meeting to discuss the parents' letter, Mrs. Peel, who earlier in the year had reassured the faculty that getting to whole language was a slow progression traversed at different speeds, now complained about the inconsistency from one classroom to another: "We have a philosophy, and people who don't agree with it should move on."

Mrs. Marx responded immediately:

> I'm an individual; we're all individuals. We may have a philosophy, but within that philosophy we're all individuals, and I'm uncomfortable with any one person saying who should stay and who should go and what people should be doing in their own classrooms.

Mrs. Peel backed up a little and made it clear that she wasn't trying to force anyone to leave. Her point at the end was that "we can't keep showing the community different faces. If we all buy into the philosophy, we should be consistent in how we deal with parents and assessment."

"I agree with that," Mrs. Marx replied.

"We're supposed to be united," Mrs. Peel continued.

"But are we?" Mrs. Marx asked. Everyone, I think, knew the answer to Mrs. Marx's question: Teachers were widely divided about how they ran their classes. But just as they resisted parents' attempts to raise comparisons across schools, they judged attempts to compare classrooms inappropriate. The structure of the school system, which kept teachers separated from one another and masked one school's activities from other schools, made the comparative talk that parents insisted on impossible for teachers.

As one consequence of the lack of comparative discourse, arguments about teaching, among the educators at least, were reduced to arguments about decontextualized notions of pedagogy. Instead of critique and self-examination, teachers tried to make sense of their work by talking about the presumed connections between idealized ways of teaching and idealized student outcomes.

This view of teachers' activities as the deployment of discrete performance strategies is heavily promoted in many colleges of education. Professors discuss pedagogy as a *virtual system* in which certain pedagogical regimes—almost always conceived in terms of *classroom* practice—produce certain student outcomes, rather than as real practices slowly accomplished over time and space, continuously modified to deal with change and contingency.

The idea of pedagogy as flowing from an individual teacher and centered entirely on classroom processes closes off concepts of teaching as grounded in relationships with parents or communities, of teaching as a fundamentally communicative activity that stretches beyond the walls of the classroom. This idea also hides the fact that shifts in pedagogy and assessment require changes in how teachers interact with parents. The Thurber teachers tried to maintain a traditional teacher–parent relationship that would have been appropriate for a textbook- and worksheet-based pedagogy in which teachers and parents communicated infrequently and teachers were left alone to teach.[8]

To the parents, however, having kids working in groups on tasks spread out over several days or longer, with the work often going directly into a portfolio rather than coming home, implied a different parent–teacher tie. Because kids weren't bringing worksheets home every night, parents wanted more direct contact with teachers, like notes or phone calls, to monitor how their kids were doing. And because kids no longer performed the same tasks in groups separated by test-defined ability levels, parents thought they needed to give teachers more input

[8]The routinization of teacher–parent communications in traditional report card systems is attested to by books like McDonald's (1971) *Teachers' Messages for Report Cards,* a compendium of prefabricated paragraphs teachers can use to describe kids, along with an appendix of "appropriate adjectives" and "appropriate phrases."

about what their kids could do. How, they wondered, could teachers know what each kid was capable of if most work was group produced? But parents who tried to tell teachers about their kids' abilities were seen as intrusive and pushy by some teachers (e.g., Chavkin, 1989; Comer, 1984; First, Kellogg, Almeida, & Gray, 1991; Lightfoot, 1981). Although Mrs. Peel, the teacher everyone thought was most successful at the whole language approach, called parents at home to update them on how their kids were doing, other teachers balked at this idea when parents suggested it to them at a meeting.

Mrs. O'Brien explained:

> I don't want anybody to be offended by this—but when I leave school, when I go home, my time is mine. And I never, I never have enough time at school to make phone calls. So I have told my parents, if you need to get hold of me, these are the times that I'm in school—I'm at school before 8:30. Call me before then, and I'm usually here after 3:30, until 4:00, if you need me.

Mrs. O'Brien and most other teachers already felt overworked. To them, the idea of remapping the temporal borders of teaching by calling parents at night just didn't seem reasonable. Under stress and out of time themselves, the teachers seemed unwilling to acknowledge the constraints under which parents also operated. Most insisted that the parents really didn't *want* to meet with them, wouldn't come in to meet with them after school, and weren't there to take their phone calls at lunch. Mr. Watts thought the teachers should just post "office hours" (like university professors) and make parents responsible for meeting with them. The ideal of parental involvement that he and his staff embraced seemed to be the one articulated at a staff meeting by another teacher, Mrs. Engels: "Parental involvement, to me, means parents taking part in the child's activities at home....Someone to help them with their science project. Getting involved in activities."

These notions of parents staying home to take teachers' phone calls during the day or coming at lunchtime when teachers wanted to meet are what Epstein (1995) called the "learning at home" conception of parental involvement, in which parents are not considered as participants in school decision making or as collaborators in developing or strengthening programs. Indeed, some teachers felt the parents' complaints flowed not from a need for better communication or a desire for greater roles in defining curriculum but from simple ignorance and an outdated worldview.

LEGITIMIZATION THROUGH ECONOMIC DISCOURSE

The protesting parents were unsatisfied after their public meeting with Mr. Watts and the fifth-grade teachers. Several took their complaints to

an assistant superintendent, who apparently telephoned Mr. Watts and told him to resolve the situation. A subsequent meeting of teachers was tempered by a realization that it would be politically necessary to appease parents. When Mrs. Tanner complained that "some parents just won't learn what it is that we're trying to do. And I mean, really, they need to be made aware of the fact that if they don't like it, they can move;" Mrs. O'Brien responded: "Their rationale is that this is *their* school and they shouldn't have to move, we should be the ones to change." Mrs. O'Brien continued,

> I think up till now we've had it easy in a way. We kind of hid in the school district. Nobody else was doing what we were doing; nobody wanted to talk to us or look at us. Now we're visible. Now people are looking at us a lot....What we have to do now is make what we do palatable.

Making it palatable meant more than just explaining novel-based curricula and portfolio assessment; it meant supplying parents with a frame of reference, a perspective that would justify these approaches, would show that they were necessary and desirable, not just fads. The resources for such a justification were limited, however. As it had set out on an independent path, Thurber couldn't legitimize itself by reference to school system practice. It had to justify itself *against* the weight of practices at other schools. Neither was it possible for Thurber to draw on support in the community. There were certainly parents who liked what the school was doing, but the traditional ties between school and community that had broken down after Tota's reassignments and the renovations had not been replaced. Whatever ties existed were between individual teachers and parents of kids in their classes. It was difficult even for teachers to call on each other for support because their isolation made sustained discussion difficult.

Instead, Mr. Watts offered as a legitimizing view the argument that new forms of pedagogy and assessment, such as those practiced at Thurber, simultaneously reflected "how students learned" *and* marked the cusp of new trends linking schools to changes in the economic system. He looked, in my terms, for a common point where teachers' and parents' circuits could connect. Preparation for work, a standard rationale for schooling, and a key component of the trajectories parents plotted for their kids, seemed to fit the bill. In the big March meeting with the protesting parents, Mr. Watts had tried to connect the form of teaching he favored to successful business practices:

> Children construct knowledge through their own actions and through interactions with adults, children, objects, and ideas. A perfect example of this is Japan. After the war, Japan moved to a totally different way of business and industry than the U.S. People worked in groups. What we've learned is that there's an explosion of information in a group setting that there isn't on a one-to-one basis. That's why it's very important for children to have interactions with adults....You know what creates the highest percent of remembering something? When you teach it yourself. You will remember 90%, according to statistics, of what you teach yourself. That's why we like to have children teach other children. Not all day long...but to demonstrate their own knowledge....Children's thinking is not compartmentalized into subject areas. This is very important.

The parents' resistance, Mr. Watts thought, was tied to their working-class backgrounds and to the declining relevance of their experience for what he saw as the emerging postindustrial age. At the meeting to listen to their complaints, he had pleaded with parents that abandoning the new approaches of the school would be:

> a tremendous step backward. And I think another very difficult thing for people to understand is that we are no longer in the industrial revolution; we are smack dab in the middle of the information age. Things were designed for the industrial revolution, and we—we're not moving out of it, we are *out* of it. We are *in* the information age, and it's hard for those of us who grew up in the industrial revolution, the industrial age, to understand the significance of that. They're going to be in a very different world.

Talking with the teachers in the aftermath of the meeting, Mr. Watts repeated these ideas and framed for the teachers the idea that new pedagogies and assessment systems were needed to prepare kids for the coming new economic order: "That's one of the other things that's registering with me more and more and more. These parents, like us, are on the end of the industrial revolution. They have not walked into the information age, and their children are in it."

As this reasoning depended on parents' acknowledging that their life experiences were no longer relevant, it shouldn't be a surprise that it wasn't entirely successful. Mr. Watts and the teachers finally had to revise the grading scale from 3 levels to 4 over the summer; a move explicitly intended to give parents something they could more easily translate into A–B–C–D–F terms. But the economic rationales Mr. Watts advanced raise some questions. In this chapter, I have discussed how school system politics, discursive constructions of teaching, and teacher–parent struggles shaped the curriculum and politics of representing students. The question of the school's place in the larger political and economic context of the city remains to be explored: Just how did Roanoke and its schools fit into the postindustrial economy, and how were ideas about the high-tech information age articulated in the school? In the next chapter I examine the intersections of these issues—intersections that involved not parents and teachers, but teachers, administrators, corporate consultants, and kids.