

BECAUSE PARENT-TEACHER conferences offer particularly rich insights into the complexities of child language brokering on social, psychological, cultural, cognitive, and linguistic dimensions, I examine this activity setting in detail. The transactions also reveal adults' assumptions about children and childhood, learning and development, and suggest how these beliefs influence children's pathways.<sup>1</sup> They illuminate some challenges that interpreters face when they engage in interactions that would normally involve only two people. Cecilia Wadensjö,<sup>2</sup> in her extension of Erving Goffman's concepts of participant frameworks,<sup>3</sup> points out that the presence of translators makes dyadic exchanges into multiparty ones, but participants often continue to act as if interactions are guided by the principles of two-party conversations. She further notes that translators have to be good listeners as well as good speakers of both languages.

But in parent-teacher conferences these multiparty exchanges were even more complex than the kinds of interpreter-mediated interactions to which Wadensjö refers. In these encounters, interpreters were multiply positioned. They were children whose social, linguistic, moral, and academic trajectories were being evaluated by their parents and teachers; they were both the objects of those evaluations and the vehicles for transmitting them. Not only were they expected to relay words between adult participants, but they were also sometimes treated by teachers and parents as conversational participants. The transcripts that follow show how both parent and teacher sometimes directed their words to the children and sometimes treated them as the conduits of information to the other party, speaking about them, using the third person.

The skills of listening that were demanded of them took on additional dimensions as language brokers had to be prepared to respond appropriately from the various positions into which they were placed.

Finally, as objects of adults' evaluations, children could be judged on conflicting criteria, when their parents and their teachers held anomalous beliefs about children's developmental processes and about what children should be allowed or expected to do. Children had to mediate between adults who brought their own values, beliefs, and assumptions to the communicative exchange and who held distinct kinds of authority over them. Parent-teacher conferences thus provide windows into intergenerational relationships (between children and different kinds of adults) as well as into beliefs about children, childhoods, development, and learning. These relationships and beliefs shaped the nature of translation encounters as well as how they were experienced by children.

### *María's Fall Parent-Teacher Conference*

It was a cold November day when I met María and her mother at Jefferson School in Engleville. The presence of María's three-year-old brother added "older sister" to the multiple positions María held in this setting. María vigilantly watched her younger brother's movements around the room throughout the conference; in the middle of the session she cautioned him about something that could fall. I had prearranged consent to record the conference with María, her mother, and her teacher, Ms. Salinger, and so after speaking briefly with Ms. Salinger, I positioned the tape recorder on the table and sat nearby to watch.

Ms. Salinger initiated the conference by giving María a few items (a bookmark and some pamphlets); she prompted María to translate by saying "tell your mom about this." Throughout the conference, Ms. Salinger made careful efforts to contextualize information, explain it in several ways, prompt María to translate, and check for her understanding. When she used specialized school vocabulary, sometimes she explained the terms to María; other times she queried to see if María understood. María, in turn, alerted Ms. Salinger to things she wasn't sure she understood, an indication of María's comfort level with her teacher. For example, when Ms. Salinger referred to "the specials teachers," María checked by asking "like drama teachers and?=" In María's translation to her mother, she spelled the meaning out, using the English terms: "drama, art, music y library," then again queried her teacher: "y gym, too?"

Ms. Salinger began the conference by reporting on María's work habits and citizenship, which she explained as "how she does her schoolwork, how she acts in class, what she does with the other students." These school values reflect larger cultural values of using time constructively, being cooperative, practicing self-control, being consistent, and participating in class discussions. (Participating in class discussions was the school-sanctioned way of talking in class, in contrast with "talking too much," which was considered problematic—a distinction that could be unclear to immigrant parents because how much adults allow or expect children to talk varies considerably across cultural and institutional contexts.) In reporting to María's mother, Ms. Salinger spoke about María in the third person, but she directed her gaze mostly to María as translator. She interspersed this report on María with a comment directly to her (underscored here), and then directed her to speak at the end:

These are the worksheets, work habits, and citizenship. How María, you know, does her schoolwork, how she acts in class, what she does with the other students, and she's always consistently very, very good. She uses her time constructively, she's very cooperative with other students. Um, always does her homework and her classwork. Um, practicing self control. She's been very good. *I know you're excited to hear that, aren't you?* She does a really great job. Her, uh, she completes her homework with quality and her, uh, her classwork with quality. But there's one area where she's not as consistent. And that's her tests. All her homework, she does very well and she participates in class discussions very well, but she doesn't seem to get the marks on her tests that I would expect from, from what she shows me in class. *Now you have to tell her.*

In response to Ms. Salinger's directive to tell her mother all of this, María protested: "I don't know how to say all that!" This comment likely indexed her recognition of the difficulty of translating these culturally loaded terms as well as the sheer length of the utterance. It also suggests María's comfort with her teacher, in that she was willing to resist the command. In response, Ms. Salinger recapitulated her points, chunking them in smaller pieces, which made the task easier for María.

Ms. Salinger had only glowing things to say about María throughout the conference. But in María's translation of this segment, we see an example of a pattern that occurred consistently across all the parent-teacher conferences that we recorded:<sup>4</sup> the children consistently diminished and downplayed their performances and assumed greater responsibility for problems than their teachers accorded to them. Much praise simply was not translated. Other praise was downgraded through syntactical transformations. The children

generally assumed direct, personal responsibility for any problems that were identified and gave disproportionate attention to those problems; here María claimed that she needed to practice more to do well on the tests, something that her teacher did not in fact say:

Dice que, um, todo asina muy bien en todo asina, bien mi tarea, o sea todo el trabajo de la escuela en la clase tengo bien, um, pero, dice que, um en las tests? Necesito más práctica.

[She says that, um, everything like is very good in everything? like, (I do) well on my homework, or like all my work in school in class I do well, um, but she says, on the tests? I need more practice.]

In glossing the positive detail into a simple “She says I do well,” María took up a socially appropriate position as a child speaking to adult authority figures: she diminished her ego and assumed a self-effacing stance. This inversion may also be considered a transcultural move, an implicit recognition that the kinds of things valued in school (for example, participating in class discussions) might not be valued by her mother and an awareness that her mother was fundamentally concerned with the teacher’s evaluation of her behavior and schoolwork—that is, was she doing well and being good or not. María’s previous teacher had told me, “I think she’s going to Yale, and her parents think she’s going to jail”; María’s parents were concerned that María talked too much, while her teacher saw her contributions as a sign of her intelligence.

A similar sort of transcultural move took place later in the conference, when Ms. Salinger invited Sra. Gutiérrez to ask any questions she might have. María translated this for her mother, and Sra. Gutiérrez spoke to María in this way: “Yo quería decir, preguntarle a ella, si te portas bien aquí” [I wanted to say, to ask her, if you behave well here]. When María translated this to her teacher, she did not just ask if she had “behaved well”; rather she inserted the possibility that she had been *bad* (something she also did at two other points in this conference): “She said that if like, how like, um::, am I being good in here like, um, like acting good or bad?” In response, Ms. Salinger took up a child-centered discourse and authorized María to evaluate her own behavior; Ms. Salinger asked her: “What do you think?” María’s reply (“I don’t know”) suggests her implicit understanding that her mother was interested not in her self-evaluation but rather her teacher’s evaluation. In this case, Ms. Salinger helped María out of this awkward position by replying directly to Sra. Gutiérrez: “Very good. Yeah, wonderful. She’s delightful. I mean, just great.” (María did not translate this praise, but Sra. Gutiérrez’s immediate response of a smile and a laugh suggested that she understood the gist of the message.)

When María mentioned “tests,” Ms. Salinger, who had been tracking the translation, asked María what she had just had told her mother. María back-translated faithfully by reporting that she told her mother “that I need more practice. Like, um, I need to learn more.” By checking for understanding in this way, Ms. Salinger had an opportunity to clarify to María that that was not quite what she had meant. She spoke directly to María to further elaborate her theory of the discrepancy between María’s test scores and her schoolwork:

MS. SALINGER: Well, not quite learn more. It seems like you know what, what you’re, what we do when we do your, when you do your homework, and when you are in class and you’re doing your work, like the beautiful job you did on the presentation?

MARÍA: Mhm.

MS. SALINGER: Right. But then when you take the tests, it doesn’t show me how much you’ve shown me in class or in your homework. It, it doesn’t quite, look the same. You miss a lot more questions on the tests than you do on your homework or the work that you do.

This turn constituted a dyadic exchange; Ms Salinger had spoken to María in the first person and looked directly at her as she spoke. María seemed to recognize the ambiguity of her position (as translator and dyadic partner) when she asked her teacher if she should explain this to her mother. Ms Salinger replied that yes, she thought so, that “that’s the important part about it.” María again struggled with the challenges of transculturation, settling for: “En mi tarea hago asina, enseño lo que hago en mi tarea, ¿verdad? Pero en, en los exámenes, casi no, no enseño asina como el trabajo” [In my homework I do, like, I show what I do on my homework, right? But on, on the tests, I don’t really, I don’t show like on the (other) work].

In the next segment much positive detail was again lost as María focused on a problem identified by her teacher: her English work was “not quite there.” Again, too, María took up personal responsibility for this by claiming that she had to practice more. This was the interpretation that her mother picked up on, as she revoiced “practice, practice:”

MS. SALINGER: This is her accuracy in reading English. OK, um, the two on here, María. You know that you got a two on accuracy with your, with your reading English. And that’s just because you’re working towards that. You’re not quite there with the English, but you’re doing a great job, you’re working towards it . . . Can you tell her that?

MARÍA: Dice que allí me dió dos porque, um, cuando estoy leyendo que, estoy practicando más y más, tengo que practicar más. Porque a

veces hay unas cosas que no me sé? Y tengo que, asina, what did you say? Tengo que= [She says that there she gave me two because, um, when I am reading, that I am practicing more and more, I have to practice more. Because sometimes there are things that I don't know? And I have to, you know, what did she say? I have to=]

SRA. GUTIÉRREZ: =Practicar, practicar [Practice, practice].

In the next segment of the transcript, María faithfully assumed her translator position and relayed her mother's words back to the teacher, but María introduced them as a question, marked by upward inflection. In doing this, she seemed to be checking the accuracy of her own interpretation, as well as the one that her mother had taken up. She may have intuited that she had transformed the message by emphasizing practice and that her teacher held a different theory about how to make academic progress. This offered Ms. Salinger the opportunity to explicitly reframe this within a developmental discourse in which María's English abilities would unfold naturally over time, not as abilities that must be developed through practice.

MARÍA: To like, practice more?

MS. SALINGER: No, no, no, not practice more. This would be, how the difference between your reading in Spanish and in English. You know, you're learning to read English better. So you're not at the same level as a lot of the other kids in the class because you're still, you're still learning your English too.

María struggled to explain this developmental perspective to her mother, but again fell back on the more familiar notion of "practicing": "Dice que um, que yo no estoy en el:: en el grado como los otros niños porque yo apenas estoy aprend-, em, um, practic=" [She says that um, that I am not in the:: on grade (level) like the other kids because I am barely learn-, em, um, practic=]. Sra. Gutiérrez had been tracking the conversation, however, as indeed most of the parents we observed did; parents did *not* rely solely on their child's interpretations to make meaning, and as we saw in chapter 3, they often coconstructed meaning with them. (Sra. Gutiérrez confirmed this after the conference, when she explained to me that she understood a little of what the teacher said and attended to nonverbal cues in the interaction as well.) Sra. Gutiérrez made evident that she was tracking the conversation when she cut María off with a gentle correction: "Empezando, hija" [Beginning, my child], effectively taking up the teacher's developmental framing. María's revoiced this: "Uhuh, empezando a leer asina en inglés" [Uhuh, beginning to read like in English] and provided additional contextual information for her mother; it

suggested that she was different from the other students because she was still learning English.

The distinction that Ms. Salinger seemed to be making between abilities that develop through practice and those that naturally unfold by engaging in the work itself (without assuming personal responsibility for practicing) was not an easy one to put into words, even in the original English. It reflects particular cultural perspectives, beliefs about learning and development, and nuances that might be hard for a child to comprehend and convey. In several further attempts to elaborate her theory, Ms. Salinger used the present participle forms of the verbs “to learn” and “to work” (“You’re learning more English grammar, so you’re working on that”) to signify this as an ongoing process, but María continued to convert this into an active first person verb: “Necesito practicar” [I need to practice].

The conference continued in this same vein. Ms. Salinger bestowed great praise upon María; María downgraded the praise and took up responsibility for improvement. María also continued to manage a complex interaction in which she was sometimes engaged in a dyadic exchange with either her teacher or her mother and sometimes positioned as the message-bearer between speakers. She distinguished between information that she was expected to translate, from information that she provided, of her own accord, to each party. For example, she provided her mother with contextual information to understand the work they were doing in class, and she told her teacher about talking with a classmate for twenty-three minutes on the phone one night to complete a project. [When Ms. Salinger responded, “You were on the phone for twenty-three minutes?” María did not translate her teacher’s words to her back to her mother; instead she told her teacher, “She (her mother) doesn’t know that, I was in my room.”]

At the end of the conference, Ms. Salinger and I engaged in our own dyadic exchange about María, with María positioned as a third party and further object of evaluation. Ms. Salinger wrapped up her conversation with me: “She’s just really, she’s just a wonderful little girl.”

### ***María’s Spring Parent-Teacher Conference***

The next conference, later the same year, again involves María, her mother, and teacher. But this meeting added an interim administrator, Ms. Jonas, who took over María’s position as translator when she walked into the conference at a midway point.

The same pattern is evident here as in the first conference: Ms. Salinger spoke glowingly about María’s schoolwork, using the current academic jargon

of “standards” and judging her performance by the cultural value of “consistency.” María downgraded this to a mere “doing well” and emphasized the problem that her teacher named: she didn’t do as well on tests as she did on classwork. This was the reason for her grade of “I” for “inconsistent (consistency in performance being a school value). In doing this, María explained the meaning of “inconsistent” but didn’t attempt a verbatim translation of the term.

MS. SALINGER: María’s report card is really good. She, she’s really doing a great job in fifth grade. All of her marks are meeting grade level standards. She’s done much better on most of her tests this, this quarter. Social Studies tests. The only reason that I put an inconsistent, is sometimes María’s math tests aren’t, they don’t show me as much as what I know that she knows. Can you translate that for me?

MARÍA: Dice que voy bien en las clases, que estoy bien, hago bien. En las tests, um, what did you say on this one? [She says that I am doing well in my classes, that I am well, I do well. On the tests, um, what did you say on this one?]

MS. SALINGER: Um, this “I” Inconsistent means that=

MARÍA: =Dice que cuando tomo las, tengo una “I” porque cuando tomo las, las tests, no hago bien como le hago en, cuando, cuando tengo tests, como cuando hago en Social Studies? Le hago más bien que en el test [She says that when I take the, I have an “I” because when I take the, the tests, I don’t do well as when I do, when, when I have tests, as when I do in Social Studies? I do better than on the test].

At about this point in time Ms. Jonas entered the room. Ms. Salinger and I acknowledged her presence by explaining that María had been translating and that we had been recording the conference for research. Ms. Jonas was familiar with the project. On her own initiative, Ms. Jonas stepped into the translator position. This offers an interesting comparative frame for understanding María’s work as translator in these transcultural situations.

Ms. Jonas did something similar to what María had done throughout these conferences—she downgraded the praise and emphasized María’s responsibility for improvement. Arguably, however, she did so for different reasons, and certainly, given her position, with different effect. Most of the superlatives that Ms. Salinger used (marvelous, wonderful), and much specific detail was glossed by Ms. Jonas as simply “doing well”:

MS. SALINGER: In every other way, María has been, doing marvelous. Her writing is, is just wonderful. I mean, she uses a lot of detail. And she’s



got really good vocabulary. Um, she's doing great on her spelling. And, um, her reading. And she's keeping up with all her homework, so I'm really, really pleased with her progress.

MS. JONAS: *está haciendo muy bien, está um, escribiendo, y tiene muchas ideas, y puede expresarse y ella está satisfecha con su progreso* [She is doing very well, she is, um, writing, and she has a lot of ideas, and she can express herself, and she is very satisfied with her progress]. Anything else that I missed, that you want me to tell her?

The specific details that Ms. Jonas did translate were “she has a lot of ideas and can express herself”—important school values, but ones they may not hold the same meaning to Mrs. Gutiérrez and were easily lost in translation. This emphasis could perhaps have reinvigorated a concern that Ms. Gutiérrez has had, that her daughter talked too much in school.

In the next move, Ms. Jonas moved well beyond a “verbatim” translation and stated her own views of what María needed to do. Just as María did, Ms. Jonas added on in a way that exaggerated María's responsibility:

*Ella está haciendo muy bien, está, um, escribiendo, y tiene muchas ideas, y puede expresarse, y ella está satisfecha con su progreso. Depende de si, de si trabaja mucho y estudia mucho? Entonces sale bien, pero cuando no pone atención a lo que estudia, no sale bien. Es evidente que para sacar buenas notas en el examen tiene que estudiar.*

[She is doing very well, she is, um, writing, and she has a lot of ideas, and she can express herself, and she is very satisfied with her progress. It depends on if, she works a lot and studies a lot? Then she does well, but when she doesn't pay attention to what she has to study, she doesn't do well. It's evident that to get good grades on the exams, she has to study.]

This message—that María had to study—was picked up and echoed by Sra. Gutiérrez, who said, “Tiene que estudiar” [She has to study].

In the next turn, Ms. Salinger attempted to take back control and re-authorized María to translate. Once again, María presented the gist of the message faithfully but reduced and glossed over the precise praise.

MS. SALINGER: And the other thing is, María is just, you know, she's just really a wonderful classmate, um, student in class. She's very very helpful with the other students. She's always enthusiastic. She asks a lot of questions, um, you know, she's just very delightful to have in class. It's been really enjoyable to, have her as part of our, our group. You want to try this one, María?

MARÍA: Dice que voy bien en todo? Y que participo y decir preguntas a los niños y ayudarles. Y, that's all [She says that I'm doing well in everything? And that I participate and ask questions to the kids and help them. And, that's all].

Once again Ms. Jonas stepped in to add her own viewpoint. Here she introduced a new concern—that María had to do her homework:

Que ella está haciendo muy bien. Estamos satisfechos, bastante satisfechos con el progreso de ella. Y que, tiene que estudiar. Tiene que trabajar. Tiene que estudiar en la casa, trabajar, y Ud. puede asegurar que haga su tarea y todo. Eso sí estaría bueno.

[That she is doing very well. We are satisfied, very satisfied with her progress. And that, she has to study. She has to work. She has to study at home, work, and you can make sure she does her homework and everything. Yes, that would be good.]

In doing this, Ms. Jonas effectively ascribed moral responsibility to Sra. Gutiérrez for making sure that María did her homework. She did not know that Sra. Gutiérrez had worked out an effective arrangement for María to attend an afterschool program that provided homework assistance. Ms. Salinger was aware of this arrangement and had stated in both this conference and the earlier one that María always did a wonderful job on her homework.

We might ask what drove Ms. Jonas to gloss over the positive detail and elaborate in these ways. Could assumptions about María's family in particular, or about immigrant families in general have framed this thinking? By considering such implicit framings we can begin to grasp the complexities of the transcultural work that kids like María do every day because they must translate not just ideas but also underlying ideologies and world views that include the interlocutors' assumptions about them and their families.

### *Estela's Parent-Teacher Conference*

The final transcript excerpts involve eleven-year-old Estela, who, like María, was positioned in multiple ways in this transcultural exchange, which involved her teacher, Mr. Vick, and her mother, Sra. Balderas, in the middle of her fourth-grade year. I'll pick up the transcript in the middle, when Sra. Balderas raised a concern of her own about Estela's homework: Estela gets desperate sometimes when she has an assignment that she can't complete in time.

She specifically connected this problem with the families' lack of access to computers and books:

Cuando tú tienes una tarea, y no la pudiste hacer por cuestión de que, la computadora no te funcionó, que te tienes que escribir, o porque no encontraste el libro o algo en la biblioteca, y tienes que entregarla para el otro día la tarea? Tú te me pones, este, a llorar, desesperada. "Mami pero tengo que entregar esta tarea." Hija, pero si no se pudo, 'ira le explicas al maestro. Eso no es para que tú llores hija. Yo te lo digo. No hagas eso, no te pongas así, hija. Tú explícale al maestro porque no la llevaste.

[When you have homework, and you couldn't do it because the computer didn't work, and you have to write, or because you didn't find the book or something in the library, and you have to turn the homework in the next day? You start to, um, cry, you get desperate. "Mami, but I have to turn the homework in tomorrow." My daughter, but if you can't, look, you explain it to your teacher. That's not a reason to cry, daughter. I tell you. Don't do that, don't get like that. Explain to your teacher why you didn't bring it.]

In her rendition, Estela did not translate this detail. She merely stated, with repeated upward inflection, "She says that sometimes? When like, you give us homework? And it's due the next day? I, I'm disappointed and I cry." This contrasts with most of Estela's translations; generally she always attempted very close or "verbatim," line-by-line translations. Perhaps she glossed the information here because of the way her mother chunked the information in a long stretch of speech; her approach may also have been influenced by her position in this transcultural space, as the object of evaluation of both parent and teacher. In her words, Estela did not transmit the reasons for her upset at home; she simply took up responsibility for her behavior (being disappointed and crying). And indeed, her voice trembled when she said this, which suggested that she was on the verge of tears here as well.

Without the information that Sra. Balderas had offered for why Estela sometimes wasn't able to do her homework on time, Mr. Vick responded to this concern based on his own beliefs. In doing this, he framed it as a problem that Estela had and that other (Latino) kids have had too—a problem of language—that their parents don't speak English (his language)—and that they don't have help at home.

I am, tell Mom I understand, and you and I, when we've had, when we've had projects, you've come to me and said, like with that country report when you had to hold it up, you said you couldn't do it

at home, because Mom or Dad couldn't bring you to the library? if you didn't have the Internet? and I understand, you know what? Flora's had the same problem, if you don't know this. Uh, Mario has the same problem. Their parents don't speak, my language. Ok. And if they can't get that done, do I ever get angry or upset with you? No never, ok? If you can't get things done because you don't have the help at home? I'm okay with that, I understand it.

Here, as throughout the conference, the teacher presented himself as a kind and caring teacher who doesn't get angry or upset, and his response to Estela's "problem" clearly stemmed from his concern over her well-being. But he unwittingly set himself up in contrast with Estela's mother, who appeared upset at this point in the conference and continued to become more agitated as the conference went on. This may have further complicated Estela's sense of being "in the middle" of two authority figures who were quite differently aligned. If she accepted her teacher's sympathetic outreach to her, was she somehow being disloyal to her own mother? To what extent did she feel implicated, as translator, in her mother's growing sense of frustration?

As the conference progressed, Estela was placed more deeply into this awkward position between her mother and her teacher. In the next segment, Mr. Vick directed Estela to direct her mother to speak to her in particular ways. He did so with the same gentle voice that he used throughout the conference, even as he placed Estela in the position of having to tell her mother how she should parent. Here Estela's translation was almost exactly verbatim (again, like most of her translations); it was tempered only by signaling this as reported speech by using the words "he says."

MR. VICK: And tell Mom she needs to remind you that, she needs to say "Estela relax!"

ESTELA: Y dice que tú me tienes que acordar, de que me tienes que decir "Estela relájate" [And he says that you have to remind me, that you have to say, "Estela, relax"].

Following this, Sra. Balderas went on to express her frustrations with Estela directly to her, using the first person, in a long series of dyadic exchanges. Mr. Vick seemed to try to spare Estela the task of translating this to him, by telling her that he understood everything Sra. Balderas had said. He continued to frame the conference in a positive light, as Sra. Balderas continued to express her own frustrations with how Estela approaches her homework assignments. Sra. Balderas spoke louder than usual and with an agitated voice with raised pitch and rising intonation. She took up the position that Mr. Vick

had given to her, as a parent who “couldn’t help” her daughter, in contrast with a teacher who could, when she said:

¿Que cuando tengas ese problema? ¿Que no te podamos ayudar nosotros, tus padres? ¿Y al otra día tienes que entregar la tarea? ¿Y no lo puedes hacer por cuestión de que no pudimos nosotros, o equis cosa? Tú vengas y le explicas al maestro y él te va a entender. ¡Ok?

[When you have that problem? And we, your parents, can’t help you? And you have to turn in the homework the next day? And you can’t do it because we couldn’t help you, or some such thing? You come and explain to the teacher and he will understand. Ok!]

In a final set of turns, a mistranslation of a single word further exacerbated the position Estela was in as the bearer of her teacher’s directives to her mother, which served to infantilize her mother. Mr. Vick told Estela to tell her mother that she “has a lot to be proud of.” Estela translated this as “You have to be grateful for me.”

MR. VICK: Tell mom again she’s got a lot to be proud of.

ESTELA: Dice que tú tienes que estar muy, um agradecida por mí [He says that you have to be very, um, grateful for me].

Sra. Balderas accepted the teacher’s supposed mandate, but in a voice that signaled disgruntlement, even as she clearly tried to end the conference on a positive note:

OK, estoy agradecida. No más que, me desespero que tú te pongas así. no quiero verte ya así, yo te lo he dicho. Yo quiero que tú te relajes en tus cosas, en tu tarea, te concentres. Eso es lo único que yo quiero de ti.

[OK, I am grateful. It’s just that, I get desperate when you get like that, I don’t want to see you like that, I have told you. I want you to relax with things, with your homework, and concentrate. That’s the only thing I want of you.]

Estela and Mr. Vick similarly made efforts to conclude this complex transcultural encounter on a positive note; Estela translated her mother’s words simply as “She says that? she just wants me to concentrate and that she is proud of me.” And Mr. Vick concluded with “Good. Wonderful.”

### *Transcultural Skills*

These transactions offer two revelations: translation is not a process of passively conducting information from one speaker to the other—what the linguist John B. Haviland refers to as the “verbatim” theory.<sup>5</sup> And attempts to provide verbatim translations can be especially problematic, given both the cultural nuances of utterances and their ideological framings and the lack of equivalence of syntactic and semantic fields across languages. When attempting verbatim translations there is always the risk of mistranslating words that can further skew the intended messages.

Estela and María each engaged a variety of strategies to deal with the challenges of transculturations,<sup>6</sup> as well as the awkward positions in which they were placed. They contextualized information, eliminated specific details, and paraphrased terms rather than attempting to find matching words in Spanish. As translators and as interlocutors, Estela, María, the teachers, and Ms. Jonas each seemed to shape their message for the audience they presumed themselves to be engaging. They struggled, in different ways, and to different degrees, with the cultural nuances of these messages, and they differed especially in the degree to which they remained faithful to the original words and the kinds of license they took in either expanding or eliminating detail. How they skewed the messages—what they said, how they said it, and what they left out—reveals much about their own positions in these encounters, their assumptions about their audiences, and their transcultural dexterity.

The words of the adult authority figures are particularly revealing of their assumptions about who these children and their families are and what they “need” or what “problems” they have. These seem to include some assumptions that led teachers at Regan to find Mexican youth lacking in comparison with Polish immigrants, as discussed in chapter 2. At times such assumptions were declared openly, as when an Engleville teacher proclaimed: “The fact is that they (Mexican students) don’t read, and the reason their families don’t read is because they don’t know it’s important or because they can’t read very well.” As many researchers have documented this kind of widespread deficit thinking about Mexican immigrants may overtly and covertly influence communicative exchanges.<sup>7</sup> It comes through in the information that speakers highlighted, elaborated, contextualized, and deleted; furthermore, deficit thinking appears especially in teachers’ additions and assumptions when they did not have direct access to the other party’s words. Such assumptions are important to contemplate because child language brokers face them every day.

When children are expected to relay these messages from institutional authority figures to their parents, they effectively act as agents of the institutions.

They are not neutral brokers in such contexts, and their ability to represent their families' interests is compromised. Like the medical interpreters that sociolinguist Brad Davidson studied or the court interpreters that Marco Jacquemet studied these children can become gatekeepers for the institutions in acts of surveillance or critique against their own families.<sup>8</sup>

The parent-teacher conferences I examined here involved adults who cared deeply about promoting these students' learning and development. Both Ms. Salinger and Mr. Vick were highly dedicated professionals who took their role as educators and advocates for children and families very seriously. Ms. Jonas's emphasis on the importance of studying and doing homework most certainly came from a place of good intention. Ms. Jonas was aware that immigrant children have odds against them, particularly in this mixed-income suburb in which upper-middle-class children had the benefits of social and cultural capital. Her translations were likely influenced by her ideas about what children like María needed to compete on an unequal playing field. She emphasized the importance of work and practice to get ahead—a perspective María and her family already fully endorsed. This was not, however, the message that Ms. Salinger wanted to convey.

Even well-intentioned, positively framed, and respectful assumptions about the children and their families complicated children's transcultural work. If child translators recognized the assumptions encoded in talk in both large and subtle ways, then they might not challenge them because they were children speaking to adults; they were children of immigrants operating in white, English-speaking public space.<sup>9</sup> Self-effacement is an appropriate stance for children to assume in front of adult authority figures, and they were unlikely to challenge inaccurate portrayals of themselves or their families.

Children also may have been aware of the multiple ways in which they could be evaluated by adults. When Estela reported on another conference in a journal entry, she highlighted the emotions she felt—not about her work as a translator per se, but about being judged as a student. She simultaneously revealed her awareness that we, the researchers, might also judge her performance. Indeed, readers of this text may judge her when I present her words to you, as she wrote them, in the way that adults tend to evaluate children when they speak and write. What leaps to your attention? What judgments do you make about Estela?<sup>10</sup>

Today of mi conferencia me senti muy nerviosa pense que lo iba a  
agarrar malos grados pero cuando mi papi avlo con mi maestro el le dijo  
que llo estaba asiendo mui bien entonses me deje de preocupar proque

supe queseestaba asiendo mui bien. Es pero que agree todo mui bien y que si tengo unos problemas le digan a mi papa pero qureo que lo agare casi tod muy muy sbien ustedes piensan lo mismo si “o” no?

[Today of my conference I felt very nervous I thought that I was going to get bad grades but when my father spoke with the teacher he told him that I was doing very well and then I stopped worrying because I knew that I was doing very well. I hope that I get everything very well and if I have some problems that they tell my father but I believe I got everything almost all very very well do you think the same yes “osr” no?]

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