I am defining the third historical time frame as the years between the mid-1990s and the present in which special education, a public school institution now for more than 20 years, is the naturalized educational response to students who demonstrate difficulty learning. I introduce five mothers whose children, born either in the late 1980s or 1990, are currently of school age and labeled learning disabled (LD): Elsie whose daughter Emily was born in 1988; Kim and Kanene whose respective sons, Jacob and Marvin, were born in 1989; Katie whose son Louis was born in 1990; and Debra whose son, Justin, was also born in 1990 (see appendix B). I also include Chloe (introduced in chapter four) whose later narratives cross into this time frame (see appendix E).

Kim, Katie, and Debra are White; however, Kim and Debra define their cultural backgrounds as Appalachian and Italian American, respectively. Elsie identifies as Hispanic with Puerto Rican heritage. Kanene is African American. Three mothers (Kim, Katie, and Debra) identify as middle class and reside in small- to medium-sized cities in the southeastern United States. Two mothers (Elsie and Kanene) live in a large metropolitan city in the northeastern United States and live at or below poverty level (see appendix C).

Two participants chose pseudonyms for themselves and their family members. The remaining three mothers, like the mothers in chapter four, rejected the use of pseudonyms, electing instead to reveal their identities. These mothers likewise describe their “identity disclosure” as a political act—an opportunity to name their experiences aloud.

Participant Snapshots

Following the format of chapters three and four, I begin this chapter with participant snapshots, or brief biographical sketches, to acknowledge each mother as an individual with a particular story to tell as well as to orient
the reader to the general positionality of each participant. I also describe the nature of my relationship with each mother.

**Elsie**

During my first semester as a doctoral student, I enrolled in a graduate seminar in which students assisted professors on research projects in the public schools. In light of my special education background, I was assigned to a research group studying inclusion in an elementary school. One aspect of the project involved a collaborative of university representatives and public school stakeholders who convened monthly to discuss the school’s progress toward meaningful inclusive practices. As a member of this team, I met and subsequently worked with Elsie, the project’s parent representative. Our collaboration on this project marked the beginning of an ongoing professional and personal relationship, including coauthorship of a journal article (see Valle & Aponte, 2002) about parent/professional collaboration under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Elsie begins her narrative at the moment Emily, a six-week-old African American foster child, comes into her life. In response to a social worker’s request to consider taking a cocaine-positive infant experiencing convulsions and withdrawal symptoms, Elsie responds without hesitation: “Yeah, yeah! Just bring her!” She recalls, “So they brought her. My family was waiting for her!” And Emily becomes enveloped by the family that is to become her own.

As the mother of a cocaine-exposed infant in the late 1980s, Elsie reads what little literature is available at the time and becomes a participant in a research study about the cognitive and behavioral outcomes of “crack babies.” Yet, she relies far more upon her own observations of Emily as well as her “mother knowledge” (gleaned from raising two biological children and other foster children) than any professional resource. Elsie remembers, “Since I was experimenting really and doing all these things that were working with Emily, the professionals were taking that and giving it to other parents to use at the time.”

With the advent of Emily’s preschool diagnosis of a speech/language disorder, Elsie begins a long-term relationship with special education professionals that continues to date. By educating herself about special education law (“I had no one else but books! You know? Nothing else but books!”), Elsie eventually gains the negotiation skills necessary to fully participate in educational decision making. However, she quickly learns that successful negotiation for services does not necessarily translate into quality education in the classroom. Recognizing the limitations of the elementary inclusion classroom Emily attends, Elsie becomes a full-time classroom volunteer to help the teacher meet the needs of all