
Access to Knowledge

The Continuing Agenda For Our Nation's Schools

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and Pamela Keating,
*Editors***

With a Foreword by
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Home, School, and Academic Learning

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Précis

When schools were an integral part of stable communities, teachers quite naturally reinforced parental and community values. At school, children easily formed bonds with adults and experienced a sense of continuity and stability, conditions that were highly conducive to learning. Today a different environment prevails in many areas. Children from low-income families must function under conditions of social disintegration (of neighborhoods, home life, and the family itself). Many suffer stressful racial and ethnic tensions. Instead of developing a sense of belonging, such children may come to believe at an early age that their opportunities are limited and lose their motivation at school.

According to James Comer, one possible solution is for the school to work toward building a stable community for such children. All school personnel should work to establish bonds between students and teachers and between home and school. Comer maintains that each child must be socialized before he or she can be taught; hence the need for students to establish bonds with school staff and for schools to serve as stable, anchoring settings.

To help schools achieve this goal, Comer presents a model that emphasizes the role of nurturance in all human affairs and that uses existing school personnel in new ways. He calls for a school-based governance and management team of 10 to 15 people, led by the principal and including representatives of all the adults in school, from teachers to nonprofessional support staff, as well as a child development specialist such as the school psychologist or social worker, along with parents. Although the team would try to solve existing behavior problems, its main focus would be on *preventing* problems. The point is to consider the needs that children bring to school, rather than just the problems created because the school system is not functioning well. By applying principles for building relationships, the

school gradually comes to be regarded by a widening circle of families as a place to be trusted, a place where they can receive help, resulting in dramatic increases in school involvement.

This model was initially applied in two New Haven elementary schools with the lowest academic achievement levels in the city. Today one of the original schools and another in the project are in the city's top five percent in achievement, with no change in the makeup of the student population (which is 99 percent black and poor).

Comer is now extending his research and recommendations to middle schools and high schools.

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A first-grade teacher in the New Haven, Connecticut, school system greeted her new students on the first day of school and gave them a general orientation on what to expect, and how to succeed, in the classroom and in the school. A 6-year-old raised his hand, as instructed by his teacher, and said, "Teacher, my mama said I don't have to do anything you say." The incident reflects a problem in the quality of relationships between home and school that interferes with teaching and academic learning. This problem is more widespread than generally acknowledged, is not well understood, and, therefore, is often deplored but receives little effective intervention.

Educators, in general, recognize the importance of parent support for teaching and academic learning but consider it a parental responsibility—something the school cannot do much about. We often limit our responsibility and mission to teaching. We think of learning as the students' responsibility, as something we cannot do much about other than to teach. But effective parental support, teaching, and student learning are an interactive process with delicate interrelationships which must be understood and nurtured—more actively today than 40 years ago when natural conditions created communities that promoted acceptance of mainstream values set among parents, school staff, and students alike.

Severe and expressed difficulties in home-school relationships are a reasonably recent phenomenon, dating from the 1950s. Because there has been a decline in the sense of community everywhere, home-school relationships are more often a problem among all groups. But the problem is most prevalent among families with children at greatest risk for school failure. At the same time, a high quality of relationships between home and school is often the only chance many such children have for finishing school and for leading reasonably successful lives.

In this chapter, I attempt to show how difficult relationships between home and school present a barrier to academic learning for all children, but particularly for low-income children from families under stress and for certain minorities. To do so, I first review learning in the context of development and include certain misapprehensions about how academic learning takes place. Next I consider how scientific and technology-based changes over the past 150 years have changed the nature of community and/or social networks, family functioning, and individual development. I then discuss the way in which the peculiar history of several groups creates potential and real barriers to successful home-school relationships. I close with a discussion of what individual schools and systems—as well as educators and other relevant policymakers—can do to promote desirable home-school relationships.

Academic Learning and Development

Interest in, some of the capacity for, and all the motivation for learning academic material is a function of social relationships and overall develop-

ment. An individual child's biological potential for learning can be realized or severely limited by the quality of relationships the child experiences in the home and family social network, in school, and in social networks of the larger society. Thus understanding development in these several social contexts is useful.

The basic task of all human beings is to provide for themselves and their families. In modern society this is most easily made possible by acquiring education and training and, as a result, qualifying for a job or career that permits the individual to satisfy fundamental needs and experience the sense of well-being associated with being able to do so. This increases the individual's potential for living successfully in a family, being motivated to rear his or her children well, and serving as a responsible member of a community and the larger society. Never before in the history of the world has academic or formal education been so necessary for individuals to meet basic human needs; thus never before has the kind of development that facilitates academic learning been so important to understand and promote.

Children are not born with the fully developed capacity to acquire academic learning or to meet any of their adult tasks. They are born totally dependent and will die without the care and attention of mature, responsible adults. They are born with a set of biological potentials which must be developed. Their aggressive or survival energy must be channeled into the constructive energy of work and play, or it can become harmful to them and to the people around them. They are born with the capacity to form a relationship with others which must be promoted by their caretakers. As parents care for children, an emotional bonding takes place between them which enables parents to aid child growth and development along multiple developmental pathways. The experience of this first relationship is the template for all future relationships.

There are many developmental pathways, but at least five are critical to facilitate adequate future academic learning: social-interactive, psycho-emotional-affective, moral, speech and language, and intellectual-cognitive. The last-named most directly facilitates school or academic learning. Academic learning is, in large part, a function of the quality of development across all the critical developmental pathways. It is not—as many of our school organization, management, and teaching methods suggest—an isolated cognitive, mechanical procedure. School success is as much a function of development in the social-interactive, psycho-emotional, and moral areas as it is a function of development in the speech, language, and cognitive development areas.

Caretakers and parents, without being self-consciously aware of it, are members of primary social networks made up of extended families, friends, and institutions selected by them, and more or less accepting of them. Each primary social network has a set of attitudes, values, and ways of behaving (or culture). Parents transmit these attitudes, values, and behaviors to their

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children in the process of rearing them. The young child accepts and receives the culture of the parent's social network with even less self-consciousness. With no "road map" or previous experience to guide his or her actions—and driven to action by biological imperatives—a child imitates, identifies with, and finally internalizes the attitudes, values, and actions of the primary caretakers. Because this process takes place in the absence of previous experience and knowledge, it is extremely powerful. It shapes personality development as well as lifelong style and behavior.

Parental Interaction

Mainstream parents read to their children and take them on trips which promote and stimulate their curiosity—to the circus, zoos, museums, theatrical programs, and so on. They usually talk to the children about what they are experiencing, clarify misconceptions, and help them understand more and more about the environment around them. Even in everyday activities—shopping at the supermarket, playing, watching television, and so on—mainstream parents often promote learning. They usually reward learning through appreciation and approval (as opposed to a great deal of criticism and punitive behavior). Misconceptions and errors are viewed as natural and necessary aspects of learning and not as a basis for ridicule or low expectations. This general approach encourages the child to explore and take the chance of being wrong without fear. It eventually leads to confident and competent learners willing to take chances to learn more and more. Such children eventually develop rich and vast experiences and knowledge prior to entering school.

As mainstream parents interact with their children, they also model and promote social and interactive behavior that is considered acceptable in school and other mainstream institutions. These children are taught to say, "Good morning," "Thank you," and "Please," as well as all the other niceties of social interaction. They are taught the rules and understandings of the mainstream game of life. They are taught to negotiate to have their needs and rights met, and to fight only as a last resort, and when there is cause. They are taught to delay immediate gratification in order to achieve longer-range goals. They are encouraged and supported in doing so—again, more often through clear statements of expectations and approval than by punishment.

The power of parents in establishing desirable behavior is often greatly underestimated. Thus children do not want to anger and "lose" parents—the only protection they have—as they traverse unfamiliar territory. The young child, unlike most adults, does not have a reassuring, successful record of task completion.

The child also picks up the social network culture—a powerful influence on behavior—from the parents. In religious experiences of one kind or another

the child develops a belief system and is often taught to be reflective and thoughtful, and to meditate about the nature and purpose of life and his or her role in society. The celebrations, concerns, and causes embraced by members of this social network are often eventually internalized by the growing child. The perceptions of social network members about themselves, their group, and other groups are also internalized by the child. And, most important, the attitudes about learning or education, and its relevance to their lives and future, are internalized by the child.

I am not suggesting that the destiny of a child is determined entirely by the first few years of life. Most children gain developmental experience that will permit them to function adequately in school even when they are from social networks different from that of the school. Nonetheless, it should be obvious that children who grow up in social networks with attitudes, values, and ways of behaving closest to those of the school are best prepared to meet the expectations of the school. Extreme differences and poorly functioning schools pose the greatest problem.¹

Unfortunately, many social and behavioral scientists have labeled mainstream behavior as middle class, as if it is inherent only in certain groups, particularly middle-income, well-educated people, and only certain minorities. The confusion leads many to suggest that behaviors that lead to school failure are desired by, even genetically determined by, individuals who display them. Mainstream behavior is necessary to permit respectful interactions among individuals as children, and as adults. It promotes a level of development and kind of behavior needed to function well in this complex scientific and technology-based postindustrial society, as opposed to the past agricultural and early industrial age society. Among every income, racial, and ethnic group, such behavior is *more often* found in individuals who succeed in school. I have deliberately used the term "mainstream" in describing the average expected developmental experience, as opposed to middle-class and middle-income, to emphasize this point.

There is also a widespread notion that nonmainstream behaviors are not modifiable and are willfully engaged in as a deliberate fashion of rejection, without cause; that these are desired, even cultural or racial, norms. The confusion between what are class, racial, and ethnic issues and behaviors and what are developmentally determined behaviors and issues often leads to the charge that institutions dominated by the middle class impose their attitudes, values, and ways on helpless persons from other classes, with the implication that that's not right.² The outcome of such a perception, however—and in some cases the motive—is that by not helping children develop well, and gain mainstream skills, schools serve to lock them into poorly functioning networks with limited future economic opportunities, and to limit their opportunities to master adult tasks.

On the other hand, ethnic and racial differences do exist. But these differences are largely in the context of experiences, style, and expression.

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They do not preclude developmental experiences that will promote academic achievement. Much behavior that is called "cultural" or "racial" (as if it were deliberately created within a group or genetically determined) is really the consequence of past and present public policy that denied some groups political, social, economic, and educational opportunities in the mainstream of the society. For historical reasons to be discussed here briefly (and because of cultural differences), the social networks in which some children grow up vary from the mainstream social network the school represents—from marginal variance all the way to antisocial, chaotic behavior reflective of major social disintegration.

Unresolved differences between families and children in the spectrum of social networks and the people and expectations in the school constitute formidable barriers to school success. The inability of schools—for whatever reason—to adjust and facilitate the achievement of children from social networks that are different puts the final nail in the coffin of academic and life success for too many such children.

Most families in nonmainstream social networks care deeply about their children but do not take them on trips that promote and stimulate their curiosity. Some do not talk a great deal to their children about what they are experiencing or attempt to clarify misconceptions. The children often learn from other children and other immature persons around them. Some parents see no benefit in helping their children learn to manage their everyday environment. Many children are not taught the social niceties, manners, or interaction skills necessary to function well with other children and adults in or out of their own social network. And some children grow up in families in which their lives and their causes are not celebrated and emphasized—in some cases they are a source of despair and hopelessness. Parents cannot serve as models of hope, confidence, and competence; nonetheless, they want their children to succeed in school and in life.

Many nonmainstream children enter school without having mastered the skills and behavior necessary for academic success. Some fight because they do not have negotiation skills. Some are unable to control their impulses, sit still at the appropriate time, show spontaneity and curiosity at the right time and in acceptable ways, or display the discipline necessary to invest in a learning task. They often have skills and are curious about things that may lead to success outside school, but that lead to failure in school. Some children have not learned to use language well. Some have never used scissors and other materials they are expected to use in school. And, as a result of this lack of preparation, these children present themselves to the school in such a way that they are viewed as "bad" or "dumb."

Our cultural or societal response is to punish badness and to have low academic expectations for children who do not appear to be highly intelligent. Healthy children can respond to school life in troublesome ways. They often act up and act out even more, attempting to control the teacher or the class,

in the long run provoking more punitive responses. Children expected to show low academic performance will often do so. Even children from backgrounds where they have received a great deal of support need continued support in school in order to perform in a confident and competent fashion.

When the staff view children as bad or as having limited potential—or view parents as uncaring or incompetent—it is difficult for the kind of positive emotional bonding to take place between student and teacher that is needed to promote optimal academic learning. It is not possible for parents to support the work of the school. And because of class, racial, and other struggles over the years—and the fact that people no longer completely accept the authority of teachers and other leaders—difficult interactions and reactions cause or intensify antagonism between home and school. This kind of attitude and behavior can be seen in the words of the mother who told her 6-year-old son that he did not have to do anything the teacher wanted him to do.

Positive bonding is needed for the child to imitate, identify with, and internalize the attitudes, values, and ways of the teacher and the school. It is this relationship process that gives positive meaning to academic learning, that motivates the child to sustain interest in abstract materials that are not inherently interesting or immediately useful. After all, what is the difference between a scribble and a letter of the alphabet to a child? The only reason the letter of the alphabet is meaningful to the child, and worth learning and remembering, is because a meaningful “other” wants him or her to do so.

Because children under 8 or 9 years of age are easily influenced by adults—note that the 6-year-old quoted above raised his hand, as instructed by his teacher, to say that he didn’t have to listen—they accept the authority and leadership of important adults around them. For this reason teachers are able to help many children who are underdeveloped make significant progress in the first two or three years of school. But around age 8 or 9, two developmental conditions begin to erode the ability of teachers to do so.

Cognitive development reaches a stage that enables the child to understand that he or she is different in some ways from the staff in school, sometimes from other children. Their feelings about themselves and other people then become an issue they must struggle with. “Do they like me?” “Do I belong here?” “Do I have a right to be here?” The answers depend a great deal on the quality of relationships between home and school, teacher and student. Also, around second or third grade the level of abstract thinking required to be successful in school increases. Children who have not had the kind of developmental experiences that will enable them to continue to achieve at this higher level of expectation will now have more academic difficulty.

The combination of increased academic difficulty and questionable or difficult relationships forces the child to begin to choose between the culture of the school and the culture of the social network. Parents, home, and the social network are the source of the child’s self-affirmation, much more

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important than the people and culture of the school. At this point—without unusual intellect, talent, or other circumstances—many children begin to drift away from the culture of the school, even before they leave physically. This process is hastened by the developmental need to begin emotional separation from adults in late preadolescence and early adolescence. Many children are then set adrift without the kind of relationship experiences and support they need and without the kind of internalized value set that will lead to continued desirable academic and social performance, achievement in and graduation from secondary school, and reasonable opportunities in life.

More troublesome negative forces outside the marginal and mainstream social network often become attractive to young people seeking to belong and develop personal adequacy and actualization. Involvement in the drug culture, teenage pregnancy, delinquency, and crime increase and become more attractive possibilities as the probability of school and mainstream success fades. This troublesome course is more likely today than before the 1950s.

Scientific and Technological Changes

Academic learning problems were not pressing social or economic issues prior to the 1960s. Most heads of households could find work, or otherwise provide for themselves and their families, and meet all their adult responsibilities without a high level of individual development and formal education. And the nature of community was such that it promoted adequate social and individual development for most individuals. But after World War II, scientific and technological developments began to affect the economy, the nature of community, and the family in a way that has made academic learning necessary; and academic learning problems are our nation's number one social issue. In order to promote adequate academic learning among most students, we must understand better the effects of scientific and technological change and their relationship to individual development and academic learning.

Before World War II, we were a nation of small towns and rural areas, and even the cities were collections of small towns. Transportation was slow, and rapid communication was still limited. Most people worked reasonably close to their homes. Leisure-time activities were usually local and communal—a part of religious or social club activities. Information and stimulation from outside sources did not have great and pervasive impact.

As a result of these conditions, adult authority figures—parents, teachers, employers, religious and community leaders—often interacted with each other in the course of daily activities. A shopping trip, a visit to the post office, and similar errands often brought adults and young people in contact with the powerful people in their family social networks and in the social networks of the larger community. These authority figures were the “source of all truth” and more or less in agreement—or unable to fully express disagreement and

effect change. Under these conditions the most powerful leaders were able to establish the expectations of, and one's "place" in, a community.

The "place" of various groups was often unfairly limited. But at the same time, the clear expectations and sense of place also provided most people with a predictable social environment, a sense of belonging, and community. These conditions permitted neighbors and friends to share the responsibility of helping children grow and perform as the community expected.

The school was a natural part of the community, and of the past, and as such, a beneficiary of the authority of the home and community. And the nature of community usually promoted behaviors that were acceptable in school. At the same time, the "place" of particular children and families provided or limited their motivation for education. Thus many children did not receive the preparation and motivation to achieve well academically and to finish school. But most such children did not act up and act out in school in troublesome ways. They simply left when it was possible. And again, it was not a problem, because the agricultural economy through the turn of the century and industrial development through the 1950s could absorb such dropouts.

After World War II, however, education increasingly became the ticket of admission to a job paying a "living wage," or to the primary job market, whether the position truly required an education or not. And since the late 1970s job opportunities more often require formal academic skills. In addition, modern jobs require a higher level of social and interaction skills, psychological development, and a higher level of thinking skills. Educators adjusted the curriculum to scientific and technological changes. And recently a great deal of attention has been given to teaching strategies and student achievement standards. But there has been an inadequate response by educators to the massive changes in relationships that science and technology wrought, decreasing the ability of many families and school staffs to support the education of children. Raising and enforcing higher standards—without a concomitant response to relationship conditions—can increase achievement test scores without significantly improving higher-level academic learning, school completion, and future life functioning among young people. A brief review of the changed relationships in the society after World War II is needed here.

After the 1940s we became a nation of metropolitan areas. Modern transportation made it possible for people to live long distances from where they worked. Leisure-time activities are now more often distant and less often communal than in the past. Television brings massive amounts of information, numerous images, attitudes, values, and ways of behaving from around the world directly to children. All these conditions serve to decrease the power of, trust toward, and agreement among authority figures. Young people often observe attitudes, values, and behaviors that are different from those their parents are trying to promote.

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In many ways these conditions are liberating in that the will of the most powerful authority figures cannot be imposed on all as easily as in the past. On the other hand, the security of a predictable social environment, a sense of place and of community has been lost. And school is no longer a natural part of the community with an automatic transfer of authority from parents to school people. The changed conditions permit distrust and alienation, and their expression. This makes it more difficult for neighbors, friends, and even kin to share the responsibility of helping children grow and perform adequately at home and at school.

But although the world of the child is more complex than ever before, children are no more mature than they ever were. They are in greater need of interactions with mature, emotionally meaningful adults who can help them manage, integrate, and use the complex knowledge and information they receive into their developing psyches. But because of changed community relationships, they have fewer such interactions. The changed conditions of community and society have put more stress on families, in turn, more often weakening their structure and functioning, further reducing the support that children need for overall growth and development and academic learning.

Students from low-income families—more often experiencing economic and other stresses—are more adversely affected under these circumstances. And although all children benefit from positive social relationships, children from families under greater stress are least likely to develop fully and achieve at an adequate academic level without significant parent-school collaboration. A disproportionate number of such children are from families and groups who had an atypical and more traumatic historical experience in this country. And at the same time, the obstacles to home-school collaboration are greatest among these groups.

Today, in a postindustrial society, young people without academic credentials, higher-order thinking skills, and good interpersonal skills are less able to participate in the primary job market. Opportunities in the secondary job market less often enable people to take care of themselves and their families and meet other adult tasks. Thus students who drop out of school are more likely to be on a downhill course in life and to contribute to the social problems in our society.

Group Experience and Academic Learning

Heads of households are expected to work, care for themselves and their families, experience the well-being related to being able to do so, and be motivated to be responsible childrearers, citizens of the community and society. Thus it is critical that most people be able to participate in the primary job market of the economy or otherwise earn a "living wage." Most immigrant groups in America underwent three generations of development that roughly paralleled stages in the economy of this country—agricultural

prior to 1900, heavy industrial through the 1940s, late and postindustrial through the 1980s. Most groups experienced a reasonably high degree of cultural continuity in the transition from the old country to the new. Many retained the same religion, used the same language, moved from the same place, and lived together in the new country until they were assimilated. This experience promoted cultural and social cohesion, and facilitated family functioning.

In addition, most were able to vote almost immediately. This participation enabled the groups to gain political, economic, and social power and opportunity in the mainstream of the society within one generation. These experiences, and the community conditions described above, facilitated desirable family functioning and promoted an interest in academic learning among many immigrant families. Because massive immigration occurred before 1915, most families could gain mainstream opportunities and develop the dominant lifestyle through participation in an economy that, before 1900, rarely required education or training. The strength of the family unit during that period made it possible for immigrant families to prepare their children for the moderate level of education and training needed between 1900 and World War II, and in turn, for the high level of education and training needed to be competitive in the job market since then. Blacks, Hispanics, and native Americans, in particular, had a different experience. I will describe only the black American situation here.

Blacks experienced extreme cultural discontinuity after arriving in this country. There was a loss of stabilizing cultural institutions and the imposition of a degrading slave culture. Without a protective culture, a significant number of blacks experienced social, and sometimes psychological, trauma. And among a small group, the negative effects were transmitted from generation to generation during slavery and beyond.

After slavery, a strict racial caste system emerged. Most blacks were denied the vote in the eight southern states where they would have had the greatest political power. Without political power, it was impossible to gain economic and social power in the mainstream of the society. Because of the resultant powerlessness, the black community was greatly undereducated during the pre-World War II period when most of America was gaining the education necessary to participate in the last stage of the industrial economy, 1945 to 1980 and beyond. For example, in the nine states that had 80 percent of the black population in the 1930s, four to eight times as much money was spent on the education of a white child as on that of a black child; a disparity of as much as 25 times in areas that were disproportionately black.³ As late as the mid-1960s, one-half of the endowment of Harvard was equal to more than that of the endowments of all the 100-plus black colleges combined.⁴

Despite the obstacles and adverse conditions blacks experienced, much of the group was protected from extreme ill effects by black churches and

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the rural, small-town cultures of the pre-1950s. In fact, even though most black families were not able to undergo the three-generational progression of other groups, most did reasonably well, although employed at the bottom of the economy right up to the 1950s. More than 70 percent of all black families were two-parent families as late as the 1950s, and most black communities were safe.⁵

But as education became a "ticket" to the primary job market and agricultural laboring jobs began to decrease, pushing much of the community into urban areas (with consequent cultural dislocation), many families that had once functioned well began to function less well. The loss of church and small-town culture left many with a sense of exclusion and alienation from the mainstream of society. Because blacks had been denied an opportunity to gain political and economic power, even educated blacks were denied opportunities. As a result, blacks lacked the cultural cohesion, powerful institutions and individuals in the mainstream of the society necessary to exert a pull on the attitudes, values, and behaviors of much of the nonmainstream black community. And, after the 1950s, the nonmainstream black community grew at a more rapid rate than the more mainstream community.

When the civil rights movement reached its peak in the 1960s, the nation was already into the last stage of the industrial era. By this time a reasonable opportunity to participate in the mainstream of the society required a high level of education, as well as good social and interpersonal skills. Families traumatized and denied an education in the past were most closed out by the requirements of the primary job market. Many were unable to give their children the preschool experiences needed to prepare them for academic learning. At the same time, the civil rights movement heightened their awareness of, and reaction to, denial and exclusion.

Anger and alienation increased vis-à-vis mainstream institutions and individuals. Thus developed the conditions that led the black youngster discussed previously to announce to his teacher—also black but a mainstream person in a mainstream institution—"My mama said I don't have to do anything you say." Differences of all kinds—income, education, race, style, and class—are all potential barriers to desired home-school relationships. Without a careful and systematic effort to reduce these barriers, they persist and interfere with academic learning.⁶

Reducing Barriers

Understanding the effects of structural change on various groups, communities, families, and education helps us to conceptualize and appreciate the complexity of the home-school relationship problem. Fortunately, it is not necessary to respond to all the past and present factors involved to reduce barriers to desirable home-school relationships. A focus on creating rela-

tionships that permit both parents and school staff to promote student growth along the critical developmental pathways provides direction and reduces superficial and harmful interactions. A mechanism is required that recognizes the complexity of both the home and school as social systems, with real and potential problems, and that works to minimize them on a continuing basis and to foster cooperation in the interest of children. The school is one of the most complex social systems in our society.⁷ It contains people of mixed interests, ages, abilities, backgrounds, styles, and so on. Its facilities, materials, and supplies must be utilized in an efficient and effective way. At the same time, school staffs, like parents, lack the degree of authority born of their relationships under pre-1940s conditions. This situation often leads to a troubled school environment in which neither staff nor students flourish and parents do not feel welcome.

On the home side of the equation, parents across the socioeconomic spectrum are often apprehensive about, even afraid of, interactions with school people. Many view problems their children have (or might have) in school as negative reflections on their childrearing skills or as signs of future difficulty for their children. Parents under stress are often having difficulties in other areas of their life, sometimes feeling like failures, and a child's difficulty in school represents another failure. Some parents avoid school because they had trouble in and bad memories about it themselves. And often parents are called to school only when their children are in difficulty. Many low-income parents send their children to school with mixed feelings—hoping the school will provide them with skills and a better opportunity, but believing that school people will not do so and, in fact, have no interest in doing so. Moreover, school failure is much more problematic today than ever before.

Again, without positive parent-staff interactions, students who are underdeveloped, or most different from the school culture in style and interest, are least likely to receive the preparation and support needed for bonding, imitation, identification, and internalization of the attitudes, values, and ways of school people, adequate overall development, and the resultant desired level of academic learning. Yet trust of and affection for school staff is not automatic. Thus the home-school interface is highly charged emotionally.

Schools—more than parents—are in a position to create the conditions needed to overcome difficult relationship barriers.⁸ School staffs can be motivated to do so when they fully understand the connection between home-school relationships, child development, and learning. They are further motivated to do so when mechanisms are in place that permit them to work closely with parents while enhancing, not losing, their status or power. Adjustments in organization, structure, and management based on knowledge about child development, human behavior, and social systems can create conditions which minimize relationship barriers and promote student development.⁹

School-Based

First, a mechanism that involves all the players—the facilities, the relationships between home and school, the school music program, the school in which parents are present, the parent-teacher conference, and the parent-teacher relationship—representing all parent-teacher relationships—school.

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School-Based Management

First, a mechanism is needed to facilitate cooperative interactions between all the players—at home and at school.¹⁰ Programs must be coordinated and the facilities, materials, and supplies utilized in a way that promotes trust between home and school, among school staff, and between staff and students. The school must make a conscious effort to create a social climate, or ethos, in which parents feel not only welcome, but needed. A school-based governance and management team—with input and support from a group representing all parents, and a school team with knowledge of child behavior and relationships—is an important way to achieve these conditions in today's school.

Such a team should be led by the principal and should be representative of all the adults in a school—and in the middle or high school, of students as well, whenever possible. Such a group works best with no more than 10 to 15 members. It is most effective when teachers select their own representatives (approximately four people representing different grade levels), and parents select approximately the same number from among themselves. The parent group should include representatives of the various ethnic groups, residential areas, and other different perspectives in the school where possible. A person from the nonprofessional support staff—custodial, cafeteria—can also serve on this group. A person with knowledge of child development, relationships, and institutional functioning—social worker, psychologist, special education teacher—should serve on the governance and management team. This makeup creates a relationship mechanism sensitive to child development and capable of considering the concerns of all the players in the educational enterprise in an orderly way. It also permits everyone to be a party to meeting the challenge of a particular school.

Such a group must operate within guidelines reviewed and supported by the central office administration and at the building level. Several suggestions may be particularly useful. First, the participants cannot undermine the authority or paralyze the leadership of the principal. At the same time, the principal cannot use the group as a "rubber stamp" for ideas or approaches he or she wishes to impose. There are also obvious areas where the principal must have full authority. Second, a "no fault" approach—not blaming parents, teachers, administrators, or students for the problems but focusing on solutions—should be used, thus decreasing the likelihood of group conflict. This permits a focus on problem solving. Third, decisions should be made by consensus rather than by voting, with an agreement to try other approaches if the one selected does not work. Finally, it is helpful for the group to delegate tasks to others in the building so that all feel involved, while keeping all activities coordinated. The guidelines for service on the governance and management group should allow for continuity of experienced members as well as for change and "new blood."

The group should develop a comprehensive school plan. The plan should include strategies needed to create a desirable school climate and to reach academic achievement goals. Staff development needed to facilitate both should be in the third component of the plan. While activities in these areas can take place simultaneously, improving the social climate or ethos of a school is often needed before sustained academic gains can be realized. In many low-income areas, parents are more comfortable participating in activities designed to improve the social climate than in supporting the academic program of the school. With this initial focus, their strengths are utilized rather than their weaknesses exposed. A good social climate allows staff and parents to acknowledge deficiencies that they would not have acknowledged in a school climate that promoted distrust and defensiveness. This openness permits the kind of staff development that helps school people examine their interactions with parents and students and overcome their weaknesses.

It is in such a climate that the staff can better understand the manifestations of student underdevelopment or development in areas that do not lead to school success. They can develop skills that will permit them to modify and aid the growth of their students in both behavioral and academic areas. This ability leads to improved interactions between staff and students, and increases parents' trust in and desire to interact with school people.

Parental Support

When the development of a desirable social climate is a part of the comprehensive school plan, parents' participation can be built in as an integrated, important (rather than peripheral and superficial) activity.¹¹ Parents can sponsor workshops in which teachers help them understand what the school is trying to accomplish in child development and academic areas, and how to help their children make the most of available opportunities. In the process parents provide staff with information and understanding of themselves and their children which permits the staff to be more effective.

The professional support staff team—social worker, psychologist, special education teacher—should help all the groups plan and interact in a way that reduces home-school conflict or avoidance. Programs should be planned so that parents are invited during good times as well as bad times. Parents should be supported in their work in the school so that they fully understand what it is they are trying to accomplish and that it is truly important, and they should be helped to achieve success in their initial activities in particular so that they will not be turned off and withdraw. Sometimes a classroom teacher can work with the parent leader and group in the school to provide such support, reducing the possibility of an adversarial relationship and increasing the likelihood that the parents' contribution will be meaningful and successful.

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The resultant improved performance of the children, and the perception that they or their representatives are working in a meaningful way with staff, create a good feeling among parents about the school, which then permeates the community. More apprehensive and reluctant parents are thus encouraged to become involved with the school program. Even greater sensitivity to the barriers between home and school emerges as parents and teachers get to know each other as people sharing goals rather than as people who are different because of race, income, education, or class. The barriers between home and school are further eroded, and a good relationship can develop.

The New Haven Experience

Our Yale Child Study Center worked in collaboration with the New Haven School System and designed a parent participation program (as described) from 1968 through 1980.¹² Initially, in each of two schools serving up to 350 children, only 10 to 15 parents turned out for even the most important activities (such as the Christmas program). Eventually, as many as 400 parents, friends, and relatives attended a Christmas program, and an average of 250 participated in most activities sponsored by parents and staff. Parents' participation increased significantly in most of the more than 40 elementary schools in which we used this approach. Through a school calendar sponsored by parents and staff, the various schools have supported projects as diverse as "Welcome Back to School" potluck suppers, "Little Olympics," book fairs, gospel choirs, mock elections, and on and on. In all cases, these projects are designed to bring parents and staff together in a way that enables both groups to promote the overall development of the children and improve academic learning. Highly significant gains in academic learning were made in our initial project schools—from being 18 months below grade level on fourth-grade language arts and mathematics tests (among the lowest in the city in 1968) to being tied for third and fourth highest achievements in these areas among the 26 schools in the city in 1984.¹³ The schools were among the top in attendance and experienced greatly reduced behavior problems. There was no significant change in the socioeconomic makeup of the areas the schools served. We have now observed improved performance in most of the schools in which these methods were used to overcome the barriers to positive home-school relationships.¹⁴

Nonintegrated Parent Programs

Some people are achieving similar results without changing the organization and management of their schools. In such cases the change is dependent upon the skill level and energy (or motivation to use it) of particular administrators and individuals. And it is my impression that almost anything that

is done in schools, or most social systems, that is systematic enough and done with great energy can bring about change. But improved conditions can disappear quickly when such individuals leave the setting or are no longer able to expend the high level of energy needed on an ongoing basis.

To sustain desirable home-school relationships, student growth, and achievement at a desired level, the attitudes, values, and behaviors that promote these conditions must be institutionalized or become part of the school structures and ethos. This makes it possible for "average good efforts" and "average good people" to accept and live up to "the way it is and must be"—high standards of achievement and behavior—in a particular building or social system. When the entire school supports parent involvement—or any other shared attitude, value, or behavior—it is easier for the individual teacher to work with parents in a constructive way. This close cooperation requires a mechanism that generates and maintains the desired school ethos and behavior. And it is only when the parent participation activities are integrated into the work of the school—not peripheral and unimportant—that the barriers to parent-school relationships can be reduced on an ongoing basis.

In our work, we have observed a synergism in which the benefits—real and psychological—for the entire building are greater when activities are part of a building strategy rather than isolated and unrelated. These outcomes grow out of a sense of community and a sense of common cause. It is in such a climate that families under stress gain the support, confidence, and competence needed to help themselves and their children. At least seven parents who were involved in our initial project schools (who had themselves not finished school) went back and did so, went on to college, and are now professionally employed. A number were able to accept jobs they did not have the confidence to take before participating in the school program. Most of these parents credit the environment or ethos of the school for energizing and giving them direction and support. We believe that motivated and empowered, more confident and competent parents are better able to support the development of their children and, in turn, academic learning.

Again, I acknowledge that barriers to parents' participation can be reduced without the kind of change in school organization and management and close attention to the child development and relationship issues that I have mentioned. But such a result is often temporary, less internalized, and less powerful in positively affecting the attitudes, values, and behaviors of parents, school staff, and students.

Summary

Children are not "learning machines" that can be turned on and off, or tuned to various levels by parents or by teachers. Academic learning is both cognitive and relational-affective. It requires emotional bonding to parents

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Notes

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2. E. W. Gordon and C. Schooling," in *Policy Me* (Chicago: University of C
3. D. Blose and A. Caliv No. 13, U.S. Office of I Education, 1936).
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5. Bureau of the Census D.C.: U.S. Government
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first, and to others—including school people and programs. This interaction is optimal where home-school attitudes, values, and ways of behaving are similar. But historical and contemporary conditions have created differences and often barriers to desirable home-school relationships for children, families, and schools most in need. Knowledge, skills, and sensitivity based on social and behavioral science can be applied to change the social system of a school in a way that facilitates desirable home-school interactions and, in turn, that adequately promotes student growth and development, and academic learning.

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3.

Demography Intensification and Its Educational Impact

MARTIN

Précis

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