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Theory and Overview

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Part A

THE FIRST READING in this chapter examines theories of family and school connections; discusses how data support or refute different theoretical perspectives; and presents a new theoretical model—*overlapping spheres of influence*—to explain and guide research on school, family, and community partnerships. This article should give you a good understanding of the organizational and interpersonal components of the theory of overlapping spheres of influence and how this view extends previous models.

The second reading is an overview of research on school, family, and community connections. It summarizes the theories discussed in the first reading, provides a literature review of research, introduces the framework of six types of involvement for studying partnerships and for developing comprehensive programs in schools, and discusses five topics and questions that would benefit from more research. The reading introduces topics that you can explore further in other chapters of this volume or in other journals and books and alerts you to important issues for new research and for improving school and classroom practice.

These readings provide information on how to think and talk about school, family, and community partnerships with a useful theory, a solid research base, and an overview of needed new studies.

Epstein, J. L. (Ed) School, family and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools. (2001) Westview Press Boulder CO

1-18-06

READING 2.1

Toward a Theory of Family-School Connections: Teacher Practices and Parent Involvement*

THREE PERSPECTIVES ON FAMILY-SCHOOL RELATIONS

Three perspectives currently guide researchers and practitioners in their thinking about family and school relations:

1. Separate responsibilities of families and schools
2. Shared responsibilities of families and schools
3. Sequential responsibilities of families and schools.

These perspectives are profoundly different. Assumptions based on the *separate* responsibilities of institutions stress the inherent incompatibility, competition, and conflict between families and schools. This perspective assumes that school bureaucracies and family organizations are directed, respectively, by educators and parents whose different goals, roles, and responsibilities are best fulfilled independently. It asserts that the distinct goals of the two institutions are achieved most efficiently and effectively when teachers maintain their professional, universalistic standards and judgments about the children in their classrooms and when parents maintain their personal attention and particularistic standards and judgments about their children at home (Parsons, 1959; Waller, 1932; Weber, 1947).

The opposing assumptions, based on shared responsibilities of institutions, emphasize the coordination, cooperation, and complementarity of schools and families and encourage communication and collaboration between the two institutions. This perspective assumes that schools and families share responsibilities for the socialization and education of the child. Teachers and parents are believed to share common goals for their children, which can be achieved most effectively when teachers and parents work together. These assumptions are based on models of inter-institutional interactions and ecological designs that emphasize the natural, nested, and necessary connections between individuals and their groups and organizations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Leichter, 1974; Litwak and Meyer, 1974).

The third perspective, *sequential* responsibilities of institutions, emphasizes the critical stages of parents' and teachers' contributions to child development. This approach is based on the belief that the early years of a child's life are critical for later success, and that by age five or six, when the child enters formal schooling in kindergarten or first grade, the child's personality and attitudes toward learn-

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* By Joyce L. Epstein. Originally published in K. Hurrelmann, F. Kaufmann, and F. Losel, eds., *Social intervention: Potential and constraints* (New York/Berlin: de Gruyter, 1987), pp. 121–136. Reprinted with permission.

ing are well established. Parents teach their young children needed skills, arrange educational programs and experiences, and are guided or supported by social and educational agencies (e.g., pediatricians, preschool teachers, and the media) to prepare their children for school. At the time of children's formal entry into school, the teacher assumes the major responsibility for educating them (Bloom, 1964; Freud, 1937; Piaget and Inhelder, 1969).

Understanding the Contrasting Theories: Mechanisms Producing Family-School Relations

In addition to the three major theoretical distinctions between separate, shared, and sequential responsibilities, there are other theories that help explain the *mechanisms* for building family and school relations and the resulting variations in the connections between institutions and their members. Among the most useful are the symbolic interactionist and reference group theories. *Symbolic interactionism* (Mead, 1934) assumes that self-concept, personality, values, and beliefs are products of our interactions with others. The theory suggests that we learn how others perceive and anticipate our goals and behaviors, and that we fashion our behavior to fulfill the expectations of others and to receive their recognition. In terms of family and school connections, if teachers do not interact with parents, they cannot be informed about or understand the parents' expectations for their children and the teachers. They cannot shape their teaching behavior to be responsive to those expectations. If parents avoid teachers, they cannot be informed about or understand the schools' expectations for their children or the parents. They cannot shape their behavior to provide useful assistance to the students and teachers.

Reference group theory (Merton, 1968) makes other important connections between esteem and interaction. A reference group is a collectivity or an individual who is taken into consideration by another group or individual to influence their attitudes and behaviors. This happens when one group or individual recognizes the importance of the other or admires the positions and actions of the other. For example, if, in planning children's educational programs, a teacher considers the part parents can play, it may be because the teacher considers parents an important reference group. If, in planning their family activities, parents take the teachers' or schools' goals and actions into account, it may be because they consider teachers an important reference group. Sometimes only the higher-status group influences the behavior of the other, in an unreciprocated pattern. Teachers may take parents into account without parents reciprocating the consideration, as in some communities where parents have strong control of educational politics and policies. Or parents may consider teachers an important reference group without the teachers reciprocating, as when parents try to help their children with schoolwork even if the teacher has not given them encouragement or ideas about how to help at home.

The three main theories explain the basic differences in philosophies and approaches of teachers and parents that produce more or fewer, shallow or deep

family-school connections. The supplementary theories explain the motivations to remove or reinforce boundaries between schools and families.

Understanding the Contrasting Theories: Changing Patterns in Family-School Relations

There have been important changes in the patterns of partnerships between the home and school over time. In the early 19th century, parents and the community greatly controlled the actions of the schools. The home, church, and school supported the same goals for learning and for the integration of the student into the adult community (Prentice and Houston, 1975). The community, including parents and church representatives, hired and fired the teachers, determined the school calendar, and influenced the curriculum. When the students were not in school, the families and others in the community taught their children important skills and knowledge needed for success in adulthood.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a different pattern of family and school relations emerged. Increasingly, the school began to distance itself from the home by emphasizing the teachers' special knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy. Teachers began to teach subjects that were not familiar to parents, using methods and approaches that were not part of the parents' experiences. The family was asked to teach children good behavior and attitudes to prepare them for school and to take responsibility for teaching children about their ethnicity, religion, and family origins. These family responsibilities were separate from the schools' goal to teach a common curriculum to children from all ethnic, religious, social, and economic groups.

During the 1980s and 1990s, family-school relations changed again in response to increased demands from the public for better, more accountable schools. Both better-educated *and* less-educated parents want a good education for their children and are requesting or requiring schools to keep them informed about and involved in their children's education.

AN INTEGRATED THEORY OF FAMILY-SCHOOL RELATIONS

Changing times require changing theories. School and family relationships have been different at different times in history. It is not surprising, then, to see a restructuring of theories, from inter-institutional separation in the 1930s–1950s to cooperation between schools and families in the 1970s–1980s to accommodate the social changes affecting these organizations. But we do not yet have a model of family-school relations that accounts for the variation and process of change that will continue to influence the interactions of families and schools. The existing theories omit attention to history, student development, and the influence families and schools have on each other.

A life-course perspective (Elder, 1984) enables us to integrate useful strands from the different theories of family and school relations to correct the weaknesses of the separate theories. This perspective requires that we pay attention to three characteristics in family-school relationships: history, developmental patterns, and change.

History

Four recent trends help to explain why changes are needed in our theories of family and school relations:

1. **More mothers with a college education and bachelor's degree.** Over the past 40 years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of U.S. high school students, especially women, who attend and graduate from college. Whereas fewer than 20 percent of bachelor's degrees were earned by women prior to 1950 (mostly in the field of education), fully half of the earned bachelor's degrees were awarded to women in 1980 in many fields (Bureau of the Census, 1984). The education of mothers affects their interactions with teachers. Whereas most mothers were once less educated than the college-trained teachers, most mothers are now attending some college and have near, equal, or higher educational status than their children's teachers. There is still great variation in the education of women, but the proportion of educated mothers has made a difference in how parents view teachers, how teachers view parents, and whether and how mothers become involved in their children's education.

2. **Baby and child care.** Dr. Spock's (1950) influential and popular book increased the number of parents who became knowledgeable about and involved in the education of their infants and toddlers. The book offers sensible information to all parents about the importance of home environments for children's learning, information that had previously been known to only a few parents. Although Spock's book is not very useful in its discussions of older children and has little to say about school, it increased parents' awareness of and experience with their children as young learners. Spock's book, other child care books, and private and public health care programs continue to prime new generations of parents of infants and toddlers for the next phase of their children's lives: school.

3. **Federal regulations and funding for parent involvement.** In the 1960s, Head Start and other federally sponsored programs for disadvantaged preschoolers recognized that parents needed the help of educators to prepare their preschool children for regular school to break the cycle of school failure that threatened their children. More important, the preschools recognized that, despite the lack of advanced education of many mothers, the schools and the children needed the mothers' involvement to be successful. Mothers of children in Head Start often became involved on advisory councils, in classrooms as volunteers and paid aides, and at home as tutors.

During the same decade, Follow-Through programs required schools to recognize the continued importance of parents as educators beyond the preschool years (Gordon, Olmsted, Rubin, and True, 1979). The Education for All Handicapped

Children Act (Public Law 94-172) of 1975 brought teachers and parents together to discuss the educational program of each child. The federal programs and their official recognition of the importance of parents put parent involvement on the agendas of the local schools (Hobson, 1979; Keesling and Melaragno, 1983; Valentine and Stark, 1979). Schools could not easily limit parent involvement to the parents of children in federally sponsored programs and so more parents at all grade levels, regardless of education or economic background, became involved with their children's schools and teachers.

4. **Changing family structures.** In the past decade, two key changes in family structure have dramatically affected family and school relations. These are the increase in the number of single parents and in the number of mothers working outside the home. Mothers who work outside the home need to manage the care and schooling of their children with more exactitude than do mothers who work at home. They must arrange for their children's care before and after school, on school holidays, or during illness. Attention to the needs of the children has increased the concern of working mothers about the quality of day care, school, and after-school programs.

Single mothers are even more likely than other mothers to work outside the home and are especially sensitive about their responsibilities to their children. They have accentuated the need of all parents for information from teachers to help them use their limited time at home more productively in the interest of their children. Although working mothers and single parents do not volunteer to help at the school building as much as other mothers, research shows that they are just as interested as other mothers in their children's education and spend as much or more time helping their children at home (Epstein, 1984 [Reading 3.5]).

Increasingly, schools have had to replace traditional images of family life and patterns of communication with mothers at home with new images and new patterns of communication to accommodate different types of families. Some schools have made these adjustments to help all families, however structured, to interact successfully with the school. Other schools have not changed their expectations for or communications with families, despite the changes in families.

These four trends, over the last 40 to 50 years of the 20th century, changed family-school connections in the United States. These changes, singly and in combination, involved more parents in their children's education beyond preschool, officially and publicly recognized parents as "teachers," and increased the need for better communication between the home and school.

Developmental Patterns

Schools' and families' interactions need to fit the age, grade level, and level of social and cognitive development of the children. Schools are more like families for young students, with closer ties between teachers and parents of preschool and early elementary students. Schools may become increasingly impersonal in the secondary grades, with the aim of preparing students for interactions in adulthood with other formal organizations in government, work, and society. But

through high school, schools vary in the extent to which they communicate with, inform, and involve parents in their children's education. We do not know the type, degree, or optimal mix of personal and impersonal relations across the grades that lead to maximum learning and successful preparation for adulthood. But our model of family-school relations must be based on a developmental framework to account for *the continuity* of school and family actions and interactions across the school years and *the changes* in forms and purposes of parent involvement at different student ages and stages of development.

Change

Families and schools are ever-changing. Families change as the members mature, developing new skills, knowledge, contacts, and patterns of social interaction. A family builds a changing, cumulative history of relationships with the school for each child in attendance. Interactions with one school affect the family's knowledge and attitudes in dealing with new schools that their children enter.

Schools change as the members come and go. New students enter the school each year, new combinations of students enter classes, and new teachers and administrators join the staff. The talents, perspectives, and leadership of the school change with the maturity and stability of the abilities to consider complex educational issues, practices, and goals. They may be more open to parents' requests and to parental involvement. Schools can build a changing, cumulative history of relationships with families as the students proceed through the grades.

A MODEL OF OVERLAPPING FAMILY AND SCHOOL SPHERES

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 introduce a model of family and school relations that accounts for history, development, and changing experiences of parents, teachers, and students.

External Structure

The external structure of the model consists of overlapping or nonoverlapping spheres representing the family, school, and community. The degree of overlap is controlled by three forces: time, experience in families, and experience in schools.

Force A represents a developmental time and history line for students, families, and schools. Time refers to individual and historical time: the age and grade level of the child and the social conditions of the period during which the child is in school. For example, in infancy the spheres in our model may be separate. The child first "attends" home, and the family provides the main educating environment. Parents and teachers do not initially interact directly about the child's learning. Even in infancy, however, the spheres may overlap. For example, if an infant

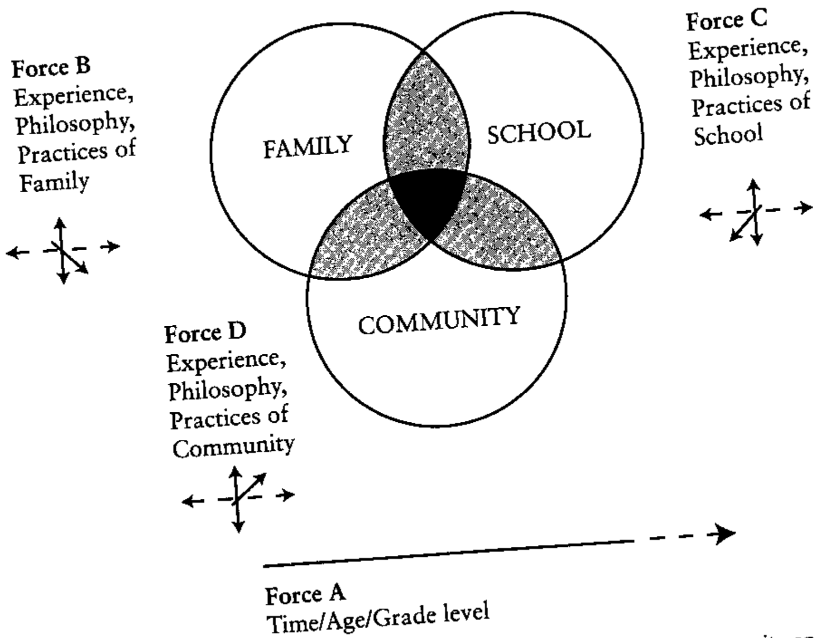
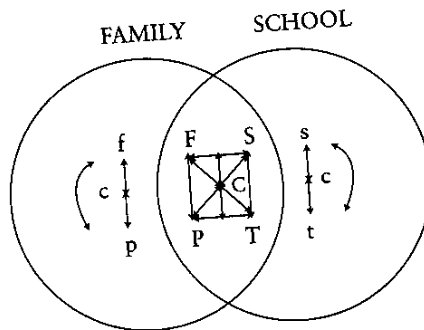


FIGURE 2.1 Overlapping Spheres of Influence of Family, School, and Community on Children's Learning (External Structure of Theoretical Model)



KEY: Intra-institutional interactions (lowercase)
Inter-institutional interactions (uppercase)

f/F = Family
s/S = School

c/C = Child
p/P = Parent
t/T = Teacher

Note: In the full model the internal structure is extended, using the same KEY to include:
co/CO = Community
a/A = Agent from community/business

FIGURE 2.2 Overlapping Spheres of Influence of Family, School, and Community on Children's Learning (Internal Structure of Theoretical Model)

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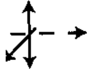

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is physically, mentally, or emotionally handicapped, parents and special teachers may begin a highly organized cooperative program to benefit the child. For all children, the family and school spheres may overlap to some extent in infancy and early childhood, as parents apply knowledge of child rearing and school readiness from books, their own school experiences, and information from pediatricians, educators, and others. Later, in a regular pattern, the spheres overlap when the child "attends" home, school, and the community.

There will be a "typical" or expected pattern of separation or overlap at different times based on the age of the child, the level of school, and the historical period when the child is in school. Up to now, the greatest overlap of family and school spheres for most children has occurred during the preschool and early elementary grades. But there has also been great overlap for some children at all grade levels because of the varying philosophies, policies, practices, and pressures of parents, teachers, or both, as represented by Forces B and C.

Force B and Force C represent the experiences of and pressures on family and school organizations and their members that need to be accounted for to study, understand, or change family-school relations. These forces push together or pull apart the spheres to produce more or less overlap of family and school actions, interactions, and influence all along the time line. When parents maintain or increase interest and involvement in their children's schooling (Force B), they create greater overlap of the family and school spheres than would be expected on the average. When teachers make parents part of their regular teaching practice (Force C), they create greater overlap than would typically be expected.

After the child enters school there will be some overlap of the two organizations at every grade level. This is true as long as there are family members (or surrogates) with whom the child and school interact. Even in seemingly separate situations such as private, elite boarding schools or state boarding schools for delinquent youngsters there are family and school contacts about contracts, payments, rules, visits, evaluations, and so forth that define the "minimum" overlap of the two spheres over the school years. The "maximum" overlap occurs when schools and families operate as true "partners," with frequent cooperative efforts and clear, close communication between parents and teachers in a comprehensive program of many important types of parent involvement (Epstein, 1986 [Reading 3.4]; Gordon, 1979; Seeley, 1981). But there is never "total" overlap because the family maintains some functions and practices that are independent of the schools' or teachers' programs, and the school maintains some functions and practices that are independent of families.

Children are connected to the same families but to different teachers over the course of their school years. Each new teacher (Force C) and each family's continuing or new involvement (Force B) create dynamic patterns of family-school relationships. There is continual adjustment in the overlap or separation of the two spheres.

Time alone (Force A), or the increasing age of the child, does not make parents more knowledgeable about how to help their children with particular school problems. Indeed, our research shows that it currently works the other way. The older the child (after grade 1), the less overlap there is in the two environments,

and the less the parent feels able to help the child in school (Epstein, 1986). Thus, in Figure 2.1, if we included only Force A, we would see, for most families and schools, quite separate spheres in infancy, increasing overlap during the preschool years and grade 1, and decreasing overlap from grades 2 or 3 on.

By adding Forces B and C we recognize that the parents' and teachers' practices and the pressures they put on each other alter the typical patterns to create more or less overlap for families and schools at every grade level. For example, some teachers of older students increase their interactions with the parents of their upper elementary and secondary school students to keep the families involved in their children's education. For children in these teachers' classes, there will be greater overlap of family and school goals and interactions than for children whose teachers ignore the role of parents in their teaching practice.

Internal Structure

The internal structure of the model in Figure 2.2 shows the interpersonal relationships and influence patterns of primary importance. Two *types* of interactions and influence are shown: within organization (lowercase letters) and between organizations (capital letters). Two *levels* of interaction are also shown: standard, organizational communications (family and school) and specific, individual communications (parent and teacher). Family (f) and school (s), and parent (p) and teacher (t) interactions are those that occur separately as parents, offspring, or other relatives conduct their family life and personal relationships, or as teachers, principals, and other school staff create school policies or conduct school or individual activities. Family (F) and School (S), and Parent (P) and Teacher (T) interactions are those that occur as members of the two organizations interact in standard, organizationally directed communications (F and S), or in unique, individually directed communications (P and T).

Family (F) and School (S) connections refer to the interactions between family members and school staff that concern all families and the general school staff or school programs. These include, for example, communications to all parents about school policies; workshops available to all parents on child rearing or child development; programs for all parents to become involved at the school as parent volunteers; or family actions that may affect the schools, such as activities of parent-teacher organizations, parent advisory councils, or citizen advocacy groups in the community. These types of involvement establish common structures for communications and interactions between families and schools as organizations.

Parent (P) and Teacher (T) connections refer to specific interactions between parents and teachers about an individual child. These may include, for example, parent-teacher conferences about the child's progress; parents' notes or phone calls to teachers about the child's academic, social, or personal problems or needs; or the teacher's specific suggestions to parents about how they can help their own child with learning activities at home.

The Child (C) has the central place in all of the patterns of interaction and influence in this model. We assume that the child's welfare and interests are the

parents' and teachers' reasons for interacting. For the child, the school and family policies, parent and teacher interactions, and the child's understanding and reactions to these connections influence academic learning and social development. The multidirectional arrows in the model show that children interact with, influence, and are influenced by their families and especially parents, and by changes in their families and parental behavior that result from the actions of the schools. Children interact with, influence, and are influenced by their schools and especially teachers, and by the changes in schools' and teachers' practices that result from the actions of families.

The external and internal structures of the model are, of course, intimately related. The internal organizational and individual relationships are influenced simultaneously by the age and grade level of the student and the common practices of the time period (Force A) and by the actions, attitudes, experiences, and decisions of teachers and parents (Forces B and C). The degree of overlap of family and school organizations and their goals and practices affects the social and psychological distance between the family and school members, their patterns of communication, and the results or outcomes of more or less interaction. Each of the components of the model can be translated into well-specified measures to study the effects of parent involvement (e.g., teachers' practices of parent involvement, parents' initiatives or responses to teachers' requests) on student achievement, attitudes, and other student, parent, and teacher outcomes.

The model recognizes the interlocking histories of the institutions and the individuals in each, and the continuing, causal connections between organizations and individuals. The model energizes an integrated theory of family and school relations by acknowledging the continuous change that occurs in families and schools; the accumulated knowledge and experiences of parents, teachers, and students; and the influence of these different patterns on student motivations, attitudes, and achievement.

SCHOOL-LIKE FAMILIES AND FAMILY-LIKE SCHOOLS

The proposed model of overlapping spheres assumes that there are mutual interests and influences of families and schools that can be more or less successfully promoted by the policies and programs of the organizations and the actions and attitudes of the individuals in those organizations. Although there are important differences between schools and families (Dreeben, 1968), we need to recognize also the important similarities, overlap in goals, responsibilities, and mutual influence of the two major environments that simultaneously affect children's learning and development.

Earlier theories asserted that schools treat students equally, judging them by universal standards and rewarding students for what they do (achievements) and not for who they are (ascriptions). In contrast, families are said to treat children individually, judging them by personal standards and special relationships, basing

rewards and affection on the children's individual growth and improvement or on their membership in the family and not on achievements relative to other children. These "pure" images of different institutional approaches and functions are not very accurate portrayals of how schools or families actually work to motivate students toward success in school. The distinction between universalistic and particularistic treatments has been blurred in families that are more aware of the importance of schooling and its components and in schools with more personal and individualized environments. These are *school-like families* and *family-like schools.*

School-Like Families

Some parents run "school-like" homes. They know how to help their children in schoolwork and take appropriate opportunities to do so. School-like families often have persistent and consistent academic schedules of learning for their children from infancy on, with books and colors, shapes and sizes, and music and art as part of their early "school-like" curricula. Before the children enter school, these families are directed by "absentee" or remembered teachers or by contemporary educational sources and resources. During the early years the family teaches the young child, but in fact it may be that images of school or teachers in absentia influence the family in how and what to teach the child.

Some families operate very much like schools. They not only create school-like tasks for their children and reward them for success but also match tasks to each child's level of ability and involve the children in active learning rather than passive listening. These families not only translate the curriculum of the school into home tasks but also put into practice principles of organizational effectiveness (Rich and Jones, 1977) and use the same structures (i.e., the task, authority, reward, grouping, evaluation, and time or TARGET structures) that guide effective classroom instruction (Epstein, 1988, b).

Although most parents accept and love their children for their unique qualities and lineal connections, many families reward their children for real and objective accomplishments, as teachers do. Many families judge their children on standard criteria and reward their children as they learn the "basic skills" (from learning to walk to learning to read) and as they acquire social skills and advanced academic skills or other talents. School-like families place more emphasis than other families on their children's place in a status hierarchy.

Family-Like Schools

Teachers vary in their recognition and use of the overlap between family and school spheres of influence. Some schools make their students feel part of a "school family" that looks out for their interests and provides unique experiences for each child. Schools may relax and destandardize their rules, vary the students'

roles, and alter the reward system to be more responsive to the student and to be more like a family.

Although schools impose some uniform standards on all students (e.g., attendance regulations, graduation requirements, formal codes for dress or conduct), these may not be as important as student-teacher relationships and personal, individual attention for influencing and improving student motivation and progress. Presently, brighter students often are given various opportunities to interact on friendly and preferential terms with teachers. Slower students often experience less personal, less family-like treatment, which may further reduce their motivation to come to school to learn.

Schools vary in how much they emphasize uniform or special standards. Some schools recognize and reward only students who are in the top groups or tracks or who get the highest grades. Other schools reward students for individual progress and improvement in achievement, as parents do. They place less emphasis on the students' place in a status hierarchy. Particularistic treatment, associated with family relations, implies a degree of favoritism or special attention to the unique and endearing qualities of individuals. This kind of treatment occurs at some schools, also, with some students receiving family-like treatment, attention, and even affection from teachers.

Time in Family and School Environments

The child is either in or out of school. Some count the hours that students spend in school (e.g., *Fifteen Thousand Hours,* by Rutter et al., 1979). Others cite the time that students are *not* in school and are under the influence of the family, community, media, churches, camps, day care programs, peer groups, or part-time employers (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984). At least 16 hours per school day plus weekends and vacations are out-of-school time. The seemingly clear dichotomy of time in or out of school is obscured by the degree of overlap in the two environments. For example, when the student is *in school,* the family's influence may still be at work. A student knows whether a parent knows what is happening in school, what the student is learning, and how he or she is expected to behave. Homework activities may affect the student's attention in class and readiness for new and more difficult work. Similarly, when the student is *at home,* the school's influence may be still at work. At home, a student may consider how a teacher wants homework to be completed and may use school skills and information to discuss ideas and solve problems.

Time in and out of school, then, is not "pure" school or family time. Time in school may be influenced by the family; time out of school may be influenced by teachers and other school programs and experiences. The degree of overlap in the two environments on matters of schoolwork and on the recognition and support of students' unique, individual talents influences the students' attention, motivation, and learning in and out of school.

EXPLORING THE THEORY: EFFECTS OF FAMILY-SCHOOL OVERLAP ON PARENTS, STUDENTS, AND TEACHING PRACTICE

From research completed over the past several years, we have some evidence of how teachers' practices reflect the three current theories of family and school relations and how the degree of overlap in family and school spheres influences parents' attitudes and behaviors and student attitudes and achievements.

Variation in Overlap in Teaching Practice

As stated previously, the philosophies and practices of teachers reflect the three theories of school and family relations: separate, sequential, and shared spheres of family and school responsibilities and influence. For example, some teachers believe that they can be effective only if they obtain parental cooperation and assistance on learning activities at home. In their classrooms, cooperation is high. These teachers make frequent requests for parental assistance in reinforcing or improving students' skills. They orchestrate actions to increase the overlap in family and school spheres of influence.

Other teachers believe that their professional status is in jeopardy if parents are involved in activities that are typically the teachers' responsibilities. In their classrooms, inter-institutional cooperation is low. These teachers make few overtures to parents and rarely request them to help their children with learning activities at home. They maintain more separate spheres of influence for the school and the family (Becker and Epstein, 1982 [Reading 3.1]; Epstein and Becker, 1982 [Reading 3.2]).

Teachers' present practices also illustrate assumptions of sequential patterns in family-school relations. More teachers of young children (grade 1) than of older children (grades 3 and 5) are frequent users of parent involvement techniques. In a clear, linear pattern, most teachers of young children assist parents to become involved in their children's education, but most teachers of older children ignore or discourage parental involvement. Along the time line, then, there is increasingly less overlap of family and school spheres.

Benefits from Greater Overlap

Our surveys of teachers, principals, parents, and students show that:

- Teachers control the flow of information to parents. By limiting or reducing communications and collaborative activities, teachers reinforce the boundaries that separate the two institutions. By increasing communications, teachers acknowledge and build connections between institutions to focus on the common concerns of teachers and parents: a child who is also a student (Becker and Epstein, 1982).

- Parents do not report deep conflict or incompatibility between schools and families. Rather, parents of children at all grade levels respond favorably to teachers' practices that stress the cooperation and overlap of schools and families. Frequent use by teachers of parent involvement leads parents to report that they receive more ideas about how to help their children at home and that they know more about the instructional programs than they did in the previous year (Epstein, 1986).
- Teachers who include the family in the children's education are recognized by parents for their efforts. They are rated higher by parents than are other teachers on interpersonal and teaching skills, and they are rated higher in overall teaching ability by their principals (Epstein, 1985 [Reading 4.3], 1986).
- Students' test scores suggest that schools are more effective when families and schools work together with the student on basic skills. Students whose teachers use frequent practices of parent involvement gain more than other students in reading skills from fall to spring (Epstein, 1991 [Reading 3.7]). And fifth-grade students recognize and benefit from cooperation between their teachers and parents (Epstein, 1982 [Reading 3.9]).

The results of our research show that although teaching practice reflects all three of the major theoretical positions, parents, students, and teachers benefit most from practices that increase the overlap in school and family spheres of influence all along the developmental time line.

CONCLUSION

Over the last few decades of the 20th century, ideas about family-school relations changed as other social conditions affected schools and families. Theories moved away from the separation of family and school and toward greater teacher-parent cooperation and communication. Our model of family-school relations integrates the discrete, extant theories and reflects the fact that at any time, in any school, and in any family, parent involvement is a variable that can be increased or decreased by the practices of teachers, administrators, parents, and students. Programs and practices can be designed, revised, and evaluated to learn which variations produce greater school and family effectiveness and student success. The members of the school and family organizations can act and interact with others in ways that include or exclude parents from their children's education and that include or exclude teachers as influences on the family. These actions push the spheres of family and school influence together or apart in a continuous, dynamic pattern, and influence student learning and development.

Schools and families vary on the dimensions that are supposed to distinguish family and school treatments and attention to children. There are family-like schools and school-like families, as well as schools and families that are distinct in their approaches to education and socialization. Some have suggested that schools and families have different goals for their children (Lightfoot, 1978), but our re-

search suggests that although parents' educational backgrounds differ, both more- *and* less-educated parents have similar goals to those of the school for their children's education (Epstein, 1986).

The main differences among parents are their knowledge of how to help their children at home, their belief that teachers want them to assist their children at home, and the degree of information and guidance from their children's teachers in how to help their children at home. These factors create more or less school-like families.

The main differences among teachers are their ability to put principles of child and adolescent development and organizational effectiveness into practice in instruction and classroom management, their ability to communicate with students as individuals, their belief about the importance of parents' involvement and parents' receptivity to guidance from the school, and their ability to communicate with parents as partners in the children's education. These factors create more or less family-like schools.

The theoretical model of overlapping spheres of influence, its underlying assumptions, and research on the effects on parents and students of teachers' practices of parent involvement aim to:

- *extend studies of families* by intensifying attention to the interplay of family and school environments during that part of the parents' and children's lives when the children are in school or are preparing for school, from infancy through the high school grades; and
- *extend studies of school organization and effects* by intensifying attention to the total educational environment of children including the home, and by examining the implications of this extension for teachers' roles and student learning and development.

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