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Chapter 8

Transforming Urban Schools Through Investments in the Social Capital of Parents

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This chapter explores some of the ways in which parental involvement at local school sites can generate social capital that can be used to improve inner-city schools and the communities they serve. The form of involvement examined goes beyond traditional calls for parents to be more interested in the education of their children and more supportive of teachers (Epstein 1991). I make the case for schools to become more responsive to and supportive of the children, families, and communities they serve by consciously developing partnerships based on mutual accountability and responsibility.

Given the poor state of most inner-city public schools, social capital—which can be viewed as the by-product of and the collective benefits derived through participation in social organizations and networks (Putnam 1995; Sampson 1998)—is most likely to become manifest in efforts to improve student achievement and through various forms of parental empowerment. Efforts to raise academic performance, though not the subject of this analysis, are likely to serve as a focal point for the development of social capital because research shows that high levels of achievement among poor children are generally made possible through organized cooperation between teachers and parents (Ladson-Billings 1994; Fischer et al. 1996). Similarly, efforts to organize the parents of disadvantaged children and to empower them as decision-makers and advocates for their children have been shown to contribute to the improvement of schools and the betterment of the communities they serve (Hess 1995; Bryk et al. 1998).

Despite the importance of schools as social institutions, there has been little recognition of the need to incorporate strategies for their improvement into development efforts in low-income communities (Fantini et al. 1970; Noguera 1996). Moreover, strategies for organizing and involving parents are typically not incorporated into most school reform plans, particularly since the advent of high-stakes testing (Ayers and Klonsky 2000). Such omissions undoubtedly contribute to the consistent failure of most poverty alleviation and school reform efforts in economically depressed urban areas.

This chapter focuses on how efforts to organize and empower low-income parents so that they are able to exert influence over the education of their children can contribute to the improvement of inner-city schools. A central theme of the analysis presented in these pages is that such organizing efforts transform relations between school personnel and the parents they serve. Specifically, we examine how strategies aimed at increasing parental participation in school site decisionmaking can either compel schools to become more responsive toward the needs of students and parents or, put more positively, open up possibilities for constructive partnerships between the two parties. Using the role and treatment of parents as the central feature of this discussion, I will show that the primary benefit derived from social capital in this context is greater power and control by poor parents over the institutions that serve them.

To illustrate this point, I begin by recounting two experiences that provide insight into my thinking on the central problem that I believe investments in social capital can help to address. As a researcher and educator, I am frequently called on to speak to students and teachers, to organize workshops for parents, and to assist in addressing some of the many problems facing urban schools. I often work on projects with parents, teachers, and students designed to improve conditions in schools through the use of action-oriented research. In some cases, I develop working relationships with schools based on a collaborative project that is carried out over an extended period of time, sometimes over the course of several years. Despite the intractability of the problems and issues we take on—student achievement, teacher effectiveness, discipline and safety, support services for children and families, race relations, bilingual education—I derive a great deal of satisfaction from the work because it provides me with a sense that I am doing something concrete about issues that affect people's lives in important ways.

Because I spend a lot of time in urban schools, I've become fairly adept at discerning how the aesthetic aspects of the physical environment and the subtleties of the interactions between adults and children relate to the character of a particular school and the cultural norms that operate within it. The lighting of hallways, the cleanliness of restrooms, the positioning and demeanor of secretaries in the front office, the absence or prevalence of greenery on the playground—these are just some of the signs I take note of to obtain insights into the culture and atmosphere of a particular school. Certainly, I learn even more about a school from talking with teachers, administrators, and students, examining school records, and observing students in classrooms, on the playground, or the school cafeteria, but the initial observations are often the most telling and informative.

Two of my recent visits to urban schools—one a large high school, the other a small elementary school—provide examples of how significant first impressions can be. In his own work, Pierre Bourdieu has referred to such examples or vignettes as "structural anecdotes," which he describes as "incidents in which the key structural elements are revealed."¹ In his own use of this concept, Troy Duster (1989) suggests that structural anecdotes can "reveal how institutional and organizational forces converge around what on the surface may appear to be an individual, personal or idiosyncratic matter." In the next section, I employ two structural anecdotes

to demonstrate the role of social capital in relationships between parents and school personnel, and between urban schools and the communities they serve.

WHO COUNTS, WHO DOESN'T: SOCIAL CAPITAL AND THE UNEVEN RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENT AND PRINCIPAL AT URBAN SCHOOLS

I had been approached by the principal of a large urban high school in the San Francisco Bay Area who wanted to discuss her strategic plan for reforming the school; she planned to submit it to the school board for review that evening. I arrived at the high school in the late afternoon just as school was letting out. As I parked and walked toward the front office, I noticed groups of students casually milling around the front of the building. It was one of the few sunny and warm days we had in the month of January, and it felt good to be outdoors. Some kids dressed in athletic gear moved across the parking lot quickly, with a clear sense of direction, and appeared to be on their way to practice. Most of the students were hanging out casually in small groups throughout the campus. Most were engaged in light conversation, and the occasional burst of laughter suggested to me that, for the moment at least, things were calm on this Thursday afternoon.

About five minutes into my conversation with the school principal—an African American woman in her early forties—we were interrupted by one of her assistant principals, a Caucasian man in his mid to late fifties. His furrowed brow conveyed a look of deep concern. Interrupting our conversation, he informed the principal that a large group was in his office demanding to see her immediately. They were there to protest the decision she had made earlier in the day to suspend a student who had been fighting with another student. He explained that the group, which included the suspended student's mother, sought an audience with the principal to explain her daughter's side of the conflict.

The principal responded by saying, "Tell them I can't see them now, but that if the girl hit the other student, she's out for three days. Period." By the troubled look on the assistant principal's face, it was evident that the principal's response was of little help to him. He informed her that the student claimed she had been attacked and only struck back at her assailants in self-defense. Again, the principal was dismissive. "It doesn't matter. If you hit another person, you're outta here. If they need to talk to me about it, tell them they can wait, but it's gonna be at least an hour."

As she turned to me to resume our conversation about her plan, I asked her what students were expected to do if they felt compelled to defend themselves. I confessed to her that as a parent I instructed my own children to defend themselves if they were attacked and no adults were present to intervene. With the assistant principal gone, she smiled and confided, "I met with these folks earlier today, and let me tell you, the momma is worse than the daughter. She probably wants to beat them girls up herself. If I see her, she'll just get in my face and start to hollering. I really don't need that. Sure, I think that self-defense is legitimate at times, but I know when I'm dealing with problem people, and this girl and her momma have serious problems."

The second incident occurred at an urban elementary school where I had been invited by the principal to speak to her teachers about expectations for African American children. The principal, a white woman in her mid-fifties, contacted me because she was under pressure from central administration in the school district to raise reading test scores. She wanted me to speak to the faculty about their expectations toward African American children because she believed "these teachers don't think these kids can learn."

I arrived at the school about 8:30 A.M., parked in the lot out front, and walked to the main office. As I entered the building, I was greeted by the principal, who was standing with a broad smile on her face in the main entrance. She extended her hand and told me how glad she was that I had taken the time to visit her school. Just as she was about to launch into the issues that had prompted my visit, three girls—Latinas who appeared to be ten or eleven years of age—entered the building laughing playfully with each other. At the moment of their arrival, the principal stopped in midsentence to confront the girls. "Young ladies! Is that the way we carry ourselves in the halls when class is in session? I do believe you're tardy, aren't you?" The girls nodded sheepishly, and as one attempted to speak to explain her tardiness to the principal, she was immediately cut off. "I don't want to hear why you are late. I want to see you walk quietly into the office to get a late pass. Your parents can send me a note explaining why you are late."

Just as she finished her sentence, a well-dressed woman in her mid-forties entered the front door. From the look on her face, it was evident that she was accompanying the three girls. It was also immediately clear that she was not at all happy about the scolding that was in progress as she entered, and her face revealed her displeasure toward the principal. Upon noticing the woman and immediately recognizing her as a parent of one of the girls, the principal abruptly changed her tone of voice and facial expression. Her frown melted into a forced smile, and the stern manner in her voice transformed into a warm, though insincere, greeting. "Good morning. I was just telling the girls that they have to use their inside voices when they enter the school building because classes are in session." Then, turning to the girls with the same warm and friendly tone of voice, the principal continued, "Girls, since your mother is here, you won't need a late pass. So hurry off to class, you don't want to be too late." The parent did not return the smile. Instead, she nodded her head with disgust that seemed to convey her displeasure and spoke directly to the girls. "Come on, I don't want you to be late for your class either, and I've got to get to work." The parent then shot a quick glance of disdain at the principal, shaking her head as if the very sight of her was distasteful. As the group left, the principal turned to me, and said, "That's just some of what I deal with all day, every day, around here. I'm the authority figure, and not everyone's comfortable with the rules, but we have to have 'em." She then led me to the teachers' lounge for our first meeting of the day.

These two vignettes provide profound insights into the ways in which what Bourdieu (1985) has termed cultural capital influences the character of interactions between school officials and the parents they serve, a phenomenon that has been well documented by scholars such as Annette Lareau (1989), Ann Ferguson (1995),

and Michelle Fine (1993). However, the two incidents also reflect more than just the peculiarities of the individuals involved. To the extent that interactions like these follow broader patterns of interaction between school officials and parents, and to the extent that these interactions are influenced by racial and class-based norms and social conventions, they also tell us a great deal about the role of social capital.

Several scholars have suggested that urban public schools have the potential to serve as sources of either negative or positive social capital (Wacquant 1998; Gargiulo and Benassi 1997; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Schools where academic failure is high and low achievement is accepted as the norm and schools that isolate themselves from the neighborhoods they serve because they perceive the residents as "threatening" tend to undermine the social capital of the community. Often the presence of such schools contributes to the exodus of families with resources, both financial and social, from poor communities and the lowering of property values. To the extent that such schools are perceived as ineffective and incapable of serving the needs of children, they operate as a source of negative social capital because they further the marginalization of the community; eventually such schools serve only those who are unable to escape them.

In contrast, effective urban public schools—and though their numbers are small, some do exist (Hilliard 1991; Edmonds 1979)—can further the development of social capital within poor communities because they are perceived as sources of opportunity and support, primarily because they provide students with the means to improve their lives. Schools that achieve positive academic outcomes from the majority of the students they serve tend to rely heavily on the support and cooperation of parents. As will be seen from the two case studies presented here, such cooperation can lead to the formation of social networks that promote the broader interests of the families residing in inner-city neighborhoods.

A key factor determining which form of social capital will be produced is the nature of the relationship between the school—and the individuals who work there—and the community, including the parents of the children enrolled. Where connections between school and community are weak or characterized by fear and distrust, it is more likely that the school will serve as a source of negative social capital. However, when school and a community have formed a genuine partnership based on respect and a shared sense of responsibility, positive forms of social capital can be generated.

In the first vignette, a school rule—the prohibition against assaulting another student—is applied rigidly and with no regard for mitigating circumstances. How the matter is handled is based on the principal's belief that the student and her mother have "serious problems." The vague reference to problems in this instance seems to mean that their behavior is perceived as hostile, aggressive, and irrational. According to the principal, who has the power to determine how this situation will be handled, such people have serious problems, and consequently, both child and parent are in need of discipline by the rules.

Closer examination of this interaction also reveals the degree of social distance between the school official and the parent—a separation that may be based on differences in class and social status as well as differences in their roles and positions.

As an outsider in this situation who had not met the girl, her mother, or the family, I immediately assumed that the principal would behave in such a callous manner only if the parent and child were poor and black. I drew this conclusion because in my many visits to urban schools I have often witnessed parents, especially African Americans and recent immigrants, being treated with disregard and disrespect by school officials. This pattern of treatment is also well documented in research on relations between parents and staff at urban schools (Comer 1981; Epstein 1991; Fine 1993). Sometimes the affront is blatant: a dismissive explanation of a rule or policy, or even a direct insult. More often the disrespect is less obvious and more nuanced, taking the form of a condescending bit of advice, or a less than prompt response to a request for help.

My assumption about the parent was confirmed when I encountered the group (parent, child, and relatives) as I left the principal's office. Agitated by the long wait and the sense that they had been wronged by the school rules, the family sat impatiently waiting for the principal in the adjoining office until our meeting was over. As I prepared to depart, the principal passed the group without acknowledging their presence and walked me to the door, an action I took as further evidence that in her eyes these people didn't "count." Because the principal believed they had "problems," she saw no need to discuss their side of the issues and felt completely justified in her resolve to deal sternly with the matter.

Given that both the principal and the parent were African American, it was not immediately clear how race or class may have influenced the nature of this interaction. However, what was clear was that the principal had all of the power in this situation, and that she could determine how it would be handled. It is typically the case that the personnel at most urban public schools do not reside within the communities they serve, and that social barriers related to differences in race, culture, and class contribute to tremendous barriers between school and community (Noguera 1996; Haymes 1995). Such separations tend to reinforce or contribute to the development of biases among the outsider professionals, who come to see poor children, their families, and the communities in which they live as deficient, dysfunctional, and even hopeless (Lipman 1998). When school personnel have all of the power to determine how the students and families they work with will be served (Anyon 1997; Payne 1984; Maeroff 1988), such an imbalance reinforces their tendency to reproduce forms of inequality and undermine the interests of the communities they serve.

In the second vignette, a different balance of power is on display. The sudden change in the attitude and behavior of the principal that I observed was triggered by the arrival of the middle-class parent. In her presence, the students were no longer treated as mere wards of the school who could be scolded without retort and dispatched quickly to their classrooms. In the presence of the mother, the principal treated the girls as welcomed members of the school community, and the possibility that they had a legitimate reason for being late to school was suddenly taken into consideration. She spoke to the girls with kindness and accorded their middle-class mother the respect and deference typically extended to clients whose patronage is valued and whose approval is sought.

In this case, the status of the parent elicited treatment premised on respect. As an observer of the interaction, I sensed that the principal's change in tone and behavior was based on her understanding that a white, middle-class parent has a keen sense of her individual rights and a powerful sense of entitlement with regard to how she expects to be treated by teachers and administrators in a public school (Nocera 1990). Unlike the parent in the first scenario, the middle-class parent also possessed a powerful weapon that is typically inaccessible to the poor—the power to withdraw her children from the school if she was not satisfied with how she was served. This is an essential difference between the two parents in these examples, and between poor and middle-class parents generally: middle-class parents have the resources and wherewithal to assert their rights if they do not like how they or their children are treated. In contrast, a poor parent is more likely to feel that the school her child attends is the only one available to her, and thus, the principal holds all of the power when the two meet. In any conflict, the principal has the ability to exercise power unilaterally over the student and the parent. Social capital is the only means available to counter this power imbalance and to bring about a respectful and supportive relationship.

PROBLEMATIZING FAILURE: THE ROLE OF URBAN SCHOOLS IN THE REPRODUCTION OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Examples such as these reveal some of the ways in which the structure of the interactions between school administrators and parents is based on the distribution of power and social capital. The ability of parents to influence the actions and decisions of school personnel is often directly related to their level of education, class, and status. Poor parents generally exercise less influence over school decisions, even decisions that may directly affect the education of their children, than middle-class parents (Fine 1993), and relations between poor parents and teachers and administrators are more likely to be characterized by distrust and hostility (Moore 1992). The power of school personnel is rooted in their institutional authority, while the relative powerlessness of poor parents is based on their lack of social and cultural capital. Lacking the traits and personal attributes that are more likely to lead to an automatic measure of respect and fair treatment, poor parents are constrained in their ability to serve as effective advocates for their children. Parents who feel unfairly treated are more likely to become hostile, but irate individuals generally cannot succeed in altering unequal social relationships, at least not by themselves.

Beyond the power imbalances at the micro level, it is also important to understand how broader patterns of interaction operative at the community level influence the formation of social capital. As has been demonstrated in numerous studies, public schools in the United States serve as great sorting machines through which inequality and privilege are reproduced (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Carnoy and Levin 1985; Katznelson and Weir 1985). Schools are not alone in carrying out this function, but they more than any other social institution reproduce existing social and economic inequities with an air of legitimacy that makes the process

seem fair and almost natural (Apple 1982; Giroux 1988). This is because the production of workers and professionals, future leaders and future criminals, conforms to prevailing ideological conceptions of merit and mobility. That is, those we expect to succeed, such as children from affluent families, tend to be more likely to succeed, while those we expect to fail—namely, poor children, especially black and Latino children from the inner city—tend to be more likely to fail. The conventional wisdom is that the winners and losers earn what they receive in the end, and that the process of sorting is fair and based largely on achievement (Bowles and Gintis 1976, 52). It is also assumed that school failure is the by-product of individual actions—a failure to study and do homework, to behave in class, to attend school regularly—while the collective and cultural dimensions of school failure are ignored (Apple 1982, 91–102).

The fact that the production of winners and losers corresponds so closely to larger societal patterns of race and class privilege has not generated much public concern in recent years, at least not beyond those most directly affected. This lack of concern is due in large part to hegemonic forces that condition popular attitudes and expectations such that the persistence of these patterns is expected and perceived as “normal” (MacLeod 1987). For this reason, even during a period when more public attention and resources are being directed toward education than at any other time in this nation’s history (Tyack and Cuban 1995), little if any of the public discourse focuses on the issues and questions related to the role that schools play in reproducing inequality.

Amid all the outpouring of concern about the state of public education, the factors seen by those most directly involved in the educational process as most relevant—access to resources and materials, the state of facilities, the availability of trained professionals—often receive little attention. There is little debate over the need to promote greater equity in funding between schools (Anyon 1996; Henig et al. 1999), to significantly raise teacher salaries, or to renew and further desegregation efforts (Orfield and Eaton 1996). Furthermore, there is no urgent effort afoot to address the acute lack of resources in personnel, materials, and services for schools in the most economically and socially marginal communities (Kozol 1991).

If there is a crisis in public education, few commentators would disagree that it is most acute in America’s urban areas. The inner city, especially those areas now referred to by some urban planners as “no-zones”—no banks, no grocery stores, no community services, no hospitals (Greenberg and Schneider 1994)—possess more than their share of failing schools. Nationally, dropout rates at inner-city schools hover at around 50 percent, test scores are generally well below national averages, and metal detectors are increasingly as ubiquitous as swings and slides on the playground (Maeroff 1988).

Urban schools in the United States are the backwater of public education, and their continued failure blends in easily with the panorama of pathologies afflicting the inner city and its residents. This fact is so well known and so taken for granted that, like inner-city crime, the issue is often not even deemed newsworthy. Hence, the failure of urban schools and of the children they serve is not problematized; rather, it is expected. New programs and policies are adopted with some regularity, but there is

little willingness to address the fact that urban schools are inextricably linked to and affected by the economic and social forces present within the urban environment. However, it would be going too far to suggest that schools are merely products of their environment. Given that there is some variation among similar schools in student achievement indicators, it is possible to argue that urban schools could either contribute to the further decline of the quality of life in urban areas or serve as viable social assets that could promote the development of positive social capital. The degree to which poor parents are organized to exert influence and control over schools can be a decisive variable that determines whether schools serve as a source of positive or negative social capital.

My own experience working with urban schools leads me to believe that any serious policy for improving urban public schools must address the educational issues in concert with a broad array of social issues, such as poverty, joblessness, and the lack of public services. Such an approach has not been attempted on a mass scale since the Great Society programs of the 1960s (Pinkney 1984; Wilson 1980), and under the present paradigm of neoliberalism, there is little likelihood that such a comprehensive effort will be launched again in the near future.

Absent the political will to support the re-creation of social welfare programs and social investments that would spur development in economically depressed urban areas, it may still be possible to initiate social reforms that bring gradual and concrete improvement to conditions in the inner city. Such an approach must focus centrally on the development of social capital through the improvement of urban public schools. Specifically, the goal must be to transform urban schools into sources of social stability and support for families and children by developing their potential to serve as sources of intracommunity integration and to provide resources for extracommunity linkages. These forms of social capital have been identified by James Coleman (1988), Michael Woolcock (1998), Robert Putnam (1993), and others as key elements of strategies designed to address the needs of poor communities. I believe the urban public schools are uniquely and strategically situated to contribute significantly in both of these areas, and that the benefits of such developments would extend beyond the confines of school to the broader community.

Before explicating the elements of such a strategy, two points must be made regarding why it is needed. First, urban schools are increasingly the most reliable source of stability and social support for poor children. This is largely because, unlike other public and private institutions, public schools are required to provide access to all children regardless of their status (Noguera 1996; Comer 1981). Children who are homeless, undocumented, sick or disabled, hungry or abused, all have a right to public education. Given the harsh realities confronting the poorest people in this country, schools are often the only place where children can be guaranteed at least one meal, a warm building, and relative safety under adult supervision. Public schools are, in effect, the most significant remnant of the social safety net available to poor people in the United States (Fischer et al. 1996). Because schools generally have stable funding and therefore follow fairly predictable operating procedures, they are the most consistent and stable aspect of the lives of many poor children.

Second, at an ideological level the notion of equal opportunity through education continues to have broad appeal in American society.² The first public schools were created in part because of broad popular support for the ideal that public schools were needed to ensure some degree of equal opportunity (Katznelson and Weir 1985). Legal precedent continues to favor universal access to public education even though the right to an education is not guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution (Kirp 1982). Though there is little evidence of public support for radically equalizing funding among schools, there is considerable public support for utilizing education to extend opportunities to the lower class for social mobility through education. (For an analysis of public support for Head Start and Title I programs, see Orfield and DeBray 2001.)

The implication of both of these points is that while a return to the Great Society policies is unlikely, it may be possible to generate significant investments in urban public schools (and charter schools) as a strategy for addressing poverty, social isolation, and economic marginalization in the inner city. If such investments are to contribute to broader community development, they must be directed toward the development of social capital among inner-city residents. Specifically, strategies that encourage the development of organizations and networks that can exert influence over local schools and other neighborhood institutions are needed. As shown later in the chapter, the cultivation of these forms of social capital can facilitate a greater degree of empowerment, accountability, and control by parents and community residents over the schools that serve them. I argue that such outcomes can enable urban schools to become a powerful resource for community development and can facilitate other forms of political and economic empowerment that will ultimately transform the character and quality of life of urban areas, through bottom-up, grassroots initiatives.

EMPOWERING A CAPTURED POPULATION

Structural factors related to the political economy of urban areas, and more specifically to deindustrialization, globalization of the world economy, suburbanization, and middle-class flight, have contributed to the isolation of the poor and had a profound effect on the character of urban areas (Wilson 1980; Massey and Denton 1993). Other factors, however, such as social disorganization and the ineffective or unresponsive operation of public institutions such as schools, hospitals, and police departments, exacerbate and further the decline of inner-city communities. Robert Sampson (1998, 24) argues that when public institutions fail to serve the needs of neighborhoods, as is often the case with urban public schools (Payne 1984; Maeroff 1988), they actually contribute to the deterioration of social capital, because "when people shun local facilities fewer opportunities exist for local networks and organizations to take hold."

As I pointed out in the two vignettes, a major difference between the middle-class parent and the lower-class parent is the power of choice. By virtue of their human capital (education and information) and economic capital, middle-class parents can

leave a school if they do not like the way their children are treated or if they perceive the quality of education as inadequate. They may enroll their child in another public school or opt out of the system altogether by sending their child to a private school. Moreover, leaving is not the only option available: middle-class parents also have other resources at their disposal with which to fight for what they want. Politically savvy middle-class parents can petition higher authorities such as the superintendent or school board; they can utilize organizations such as the PTA (parent-teacher association), churches, or the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) to exert influence on school officials; and they can draw on external resources, such as lawyers or the media, to press for what they want.

In contrast, lower-class parents typically lack the ability to choose the school their children attend, both because the cost of private school is prohibitive and because they lack transportation that would give them access to better schools in more affluent neighborhoods (Fuller 1996). Furthermore, unlike middle-class parents, poor parents are often limited in their ability to fight for what they want because they tend not to receive the same kind of respect and responsiveness from school authorities. Like the parent in the first vignette, lower-class parents, even when angry or passionate about their concerns, are more likely to be disregarded and not taken seriously by school officials (Lareau 1988; Henig et al. 1999; Kozol 1991; Comer 1981; Fine 1993).

For this reason, we should consider how social capital—that which is derived from organization and association—can offset the relative powerlessness of low-income parents. Robert Putnam (1995, 76) suggests that we ask ourselves: "What types of organizations and networks most effectively embody—or generate—social capital, in the sense of mutual reciprocity, the resolution of dilemmas of collective action, and the broadening of social identities?" To the extent that parents and concerned community allies are able to marshal resources, both organizational and legal, and expand their social networks in ways that enable them to increase the support they receive from churches, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and established civic groups, I believe that urban schools in economically depressed areas can be transformed into community assets that more effectively respond to the needs of those they serve. Organization can serve as a source of power for low-income parents and counter the powerlessness they typically experience when interacting with public agencies as isolated individuals.

TRANSFORMING URBAN SCHOOLS BY INCREASING COMMUNITY CONTROL

The notion that schools can be improved by increasing parental and community control over them is not new, though the idea has recently gained interest and popularity. The first and most famous effort of this kind was launched in New York City in 1968, when an experiment referred to as "community control" was launched in the Oceanhill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn (Fantini et al. 1970). Under the plan, governance of the district was turned over to a locally elected board made up of parents, church leaders, and community residents. The board was empowered

to make decisions related to the governance of the schools (three elementary, one intermediate, and one middle school) in the district. This included the hiring and firing of administrators, the allocation of resources, and general oversight of educational performance. The experiment began in the fall of 1968 with the hope that increased local involvement in school governance would improve the quality of schools in this low-income neighborhood (Fantini et al. 1970, 163).

Shortly after the experiment commenced, conflict between the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and the board erupted when the board, acting on the recommendation of Superintendent Rhody McCoy, called for the involuntary transfer of eighteen teachers. These teachers were accused of undermining the goals of the experiment in community control, and the board used their dismissal as a signal to the union that they were indeed in control. The UFT responded by calling for a city-wide strike, which brought public education in New York City to a halt for more than one million children.

More than just an issue of who had power and who could exercise control, the conflict between the community board and the union also exposed profound differences related to the racial implications of the experiment. To a large degree, the concept of community control was embraced because it satisfied two distinct needs: a desire to improve schools in a low-income neighborhood that had long been perceived as dysfunctional and of low quality, and a desire for a concrete, local manifestation of black and Puerto Rican nationalism, which at the time was interpreted as exercising greater control over neighborhood institutions. Through community control, parents and activists, religious leaders and politicians, united in wresting control of neighborhood schools out of the hands of educators, who were perceived as indifferent and unsympathetic to the needs of the community and its children. In their place, educators who shared the racial and cultural background of residents, as well as the ideological aspirations of the board, were invited to help implement this larger agenda of political empowerment.

Despite the controversy associated with initiatives such as the one in Oceanhill-Brownsville, the call for greater community control of schools and other public services was a strategy that had been growing in popularity in antipoverty programs for some time. Beginning in 1964 with the passage of the Equal Opportunity Act, community action programs serving low-income communities were encouraged to "develop, conduct and administer programs with the maximum feasible participation of residents of the area and members of the groups served" (quoted in Fantini et al. 1970, 10). Similar proposals for greater community control over public services had been made with regard to the management of public housing and police departments: citizens' review boards had been called for as a way of improving relations between community and police and reducing charges or police brutality (Skolnick and Currie 1994). Although such proposals in housing and law enforcement represented a significant departure from past practice, community control at an urban public school in New York City was not unlike the kind of relationship between schools and the communities they served in many other parts of the country. In fact, the logic of the idea was completely consistent with the principle of local control—an idea central to the character of American public schools

since their creation in the mid-nineteenth century (Cremin 1988; Katznelson and Weir 1985; Tyack 1974). Kenneth Clark, the psychologist who championed the racial integration of schools, articulated the fundamental logic of the proposal:

If an epidemic of low academic achievement swept over suburban schools drastic measures would be imposed. Administrators and school boards would topple, and teachers would be trained or dismissed. If students were regularly demeaned or dehumanized in those schools, cries of outrage in the PTAs would be heard—and listened to—and action would be taken immediately. Accountability at schools in small towns and suburbs is so implicitly a given that the term "community control" never is used by those who have it. (quoted in Fantini et al. 1970, 8)

Although a certain degree of control might be taken for granted in middle-class suburban schools, in the economically and socially marginal communities of the inner city the notion that community residents had the ability to elect representatives to govern local schools was seen as a radical and risky experiment. Critics of the idea, such as the sociologist Daniel P. Moynihan (1969, 57), argued that placing poor people in control of neighborhood schools "simply weighs them down with yet another burden with which they are not competent to deal." Similar arguments were made by UFT President Albert Shanker, who argued that community control would turn the schools over to vigilantes and racists, and by others who condemned the Oceanhill-Brownsville experiment as "too political" (Schrag 1969) and "overly ambitious" (Fantini 1970).

Ultimately, it was the UFT strike and the capitulation of Mayor John Lindsay (who initially supported the plan) to the teachers' union that brought an end to community control in Oceanhill-Brownsville. Yet despite the fact that the community control experiment was aborted long before its impact on the educational performance of children could be assessed—as has often been true with other policy innovations—the idea of improving urban schools through various forms of decentralized management and parental empowerment has resurfaced in recent years and gained new credibility. "Community control" is no longer the label affixed to these initiatives, but throughout the country reforms aimed at increasing parents' influence on school decisionmaking bodies have become popular. The Comer (1981) model is one of the better-known reform strategies that advocates such an approach. Site-based management is another, though typically it leads to greater power for school personnel than for parents in the decisionmaking process (Fine 1993). Many charter schools have also been designed with the intent of providing parents with a greater voice in school governance (Wells 1998), and many public schools have granted decision-making authority to locally elected boards (Wong et al. 1999).

The most widely heralded of these initiatives is the Chicago Local School Council initiative—which was approved by the Illinois State Legislature in 1989—and the community-parent organizing efforts led by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in Texas (Shirley 1997). Ironically, both models are similar to the older Oceanhill-

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Brownsville experiment of 1968, though the similarity has never been acknowledged by the policymakers who supported it. The same underlying principle—that schools serving poor people can be improved by providing parents with the organizational capacity to exert control and hold them accountable—is still operative. Interestingly, in both places where these reforms have been instituted, significant gains in student achievement have been recorded. Although it is nearly impossible to prove that changes in governance have served as the catalyst for improvements in student performance, there is evidence that many parents in Chicago and the Texas public schools have expressed greater satisfaction with the quality of their schools since these reforms have gone into effect (Wong et al. 1999; Shirley 1997).

LESSONS FROM EXISTING MODELS OF PARENTAL EMPOWERMENT

Before describing how parental empowerment can transform urban schools, it may be helpful to return briefly to the theory underlying such an approach. Building on the arguments made by Michael Woolcock (1998) and others (Sampson 1998; Putnam 1993), poor communities are typically characterized by what William Julius Wilson (1980) describes as social isolation caused by concentrations of poverty and a lack of extracommunity linkages. Some poor urban areas may also have weak intracommunity ties owing to the physical and economic deterioration of the community (Greenberg and Schneider 1994), high levels of distrust among residents, a lack of formal and informal civic associations, and what Edward Banfield (1968) has termed “amoral familism.” However, even when such ties do exist at either a neighborhood (Jacobs 1961; Whyte 1981) or a kinship level (Stack 1974), lack of access to resource-rich social networks can prevent a community from prospering.

Efforts to enhance the control of parents over the schools that serve them can undergird the development of both of these aspects of social capital. Because families are required by law to send their children to school, schools exert a centripetal force on neighborhoods, bringing together residents who might otherwise have no reason to interact (Noguera 1996). It is true that the interaction required is often limited to making sure that children attend school, and that most of the interaction happens among children. However, through connections created by children, parents are frequently brought into contact with one another, and thus the potential arises for other forms of association. Of course, not all contacts between children of different racial and cultural backgrounds are harmonious, and in neighborhoods experiencing rapid demographic transition, schools may in fact become sites of racial conflict (Metz 1978; Noguera 1995). However, it is also often the case that schools serve as social spaces where interaction across race and culture is possible, and moreover, schools are often sites where new identities and connections between groups are forged (Darder 1991). The main point is that urban schools can create or enhance a key aspect of social capital—intracommunity ties.

Schools can also serve as a medium through which low-income parents develop extracommunity linkages to actors who can provide access to resources. Local schools are typically connected to larger districts and political institutions. By gaining control over local schools, parents can begin to exert political influence at a broader level and tap into other resources. In cities across the country, a number of active parents, particularly women of color, have used the experience and connections developed from school-based organizing to run for local elected office (Valle and Torres 1998). Finally, politicians are more likely to notice and take interest in parents who are organized, and foundations and public organizations that have an interest in supporting poor people generally find it easier to work with established organizations rather than random individuals.

In the final pages, I describe how efforts aimed at empowering parents can lead to the development of social capital and facilitate school improvement in urban areas. These examples are drawn from two schools with which I have worked closely: Berkeley High School (BHS) and the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). There are undoubtedly other schools and school districts in other cities that have employed similar strategies. However, I have chosen to present these two cases because my intimate involvement with the process of parental involvement provides me with greater insight into how such policies have contributed to change. In my own experience, on matters pertaining to the empowerment of poor people, firsthand knowledge derived from direct observation and participation is more valuable, and perhaps even more reliable, than evaluative reports written by detached outsiders. I have found that it is too easy for researchers to exaggerate, distort, or fail to comprehend whether participation is genuine and authentic, or whether those said to be empowered actually feel that way (Fine 1993).

Putnam (1995, 35–36) has argued that the most important forms of social capital consist of “features of social organizations, such as networks, norms and trust, that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit.” Coleman (1988, 107) applies the concept of closure to his analysis of social capital to argue that norms and sanctions on behavior that support group goals and aspirations develop only when “the trustworthiness of social structures allows for the proliferation of obligations and expectations.” Coleman argues that congruity in values leads to a reinforcement of social norms that promote regular school attendance, conformity to school rules, and concern for academic achievement. In contrast, Coleman contends, public schools tend to have relatively low social closure with the families they serve, and consequently, children often get lost in the discontinuity between the values and norms promoted at school (which may be nebulous and difficult to discern) and those supported by families.

Building on Coleman’s point, I argue that public schools can more effectively serve the needs of the children who attend them when efforts aimed at producing greater closure are pursued. Such an approach has been actively pursued in the San Francisco Unified School District, where a concerted effort to invest in parents has been in place for the last six years (Noguera 1996). As part of Superintendent Waldemar Rojas’s strategy for raising student achievement, the following policies and actions have been taken. An office of parent relations has been established for

the purpose of coordinating communication between the district and parents. Parent centers, located in poor neighborhoods and aimed specifically at Latino, Asian, and African American parents, have been funded and developed. Several kinds of community-based mobilizations, including marches, conferences, and rallies, have been organized for the purpose of generating active parental participation in school and districtwide affairs. Finally, parents have been delegated a greater role in the governance of the district and particular schools.

In addition to these steps, a representative of the districtwide PTA sits on the superintendent's cabinet and on the committee that negotiates with the various collective bargaining units in the district. Parents also have decisionmaking authority at schools that have been reconstituted, particularly in the selection of new teachers and administrators.³

Documenting the impact of these strategies is difficult. Test scores and other key indicators of student performance (grades, graduation rates, admission to college, and so on) for all ethnic groups have risen steadily for each of the six years that the plan has been in place. There is no way of knowing, however, how much credit should be assigned to the district's strategy of investing in parents for this change in student outcomes.

As a consultant to the district over the last five years, I have witnessed firsthand how the district's emphasis on parental empowerment has influenced the character of discussion of educational issues at both the site and district levels.⁴ Though the ability of low-income parents to participate in schools is frequently limited by time, language, and lack of access to transportation, in San Francisco there has been a concerted effort to overcome these constraints, and the evidence shows that it has been successful.

For the last three years, the district has organized a citywide parent empowerment conference that has attracted more than eight hundred parents each year. Most significant for me was the fact that the district provided transportation, translation, and child care to make it possible for parents from the poorest parts of the city to participate. Beyond providing workshops on what is commonly referred to as parent education (for example, how to help your child with homework, how to be an advocate for your child, what a parent should know about college), the sessions also addressed some of the controversial policy issues facing the district. Sessions on the impact of propositions 187, 209, and 227 have been held, as well as policy-oriented discussions on issues such as social promotion.⁵ All three of the parent centers were created as a result of the conferences, and each of the centers currently reports active involvement at the workshops and other events for parents that they sponsor at schools in the community.⁶

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, in the raucous and bitter hearings over reconstitution, which pitted angry members of the teachers' union against an adamant district administration, parents have played an unpredictable role. Both sides have courted parents heavily to support their dichotomous positions on the issue: for the union, reconstitution is too heavy-handed and disruptive, but the administration feels that drastic measures are needed to improve conditions in schools. However, instead of being manipulated by one side or the other, parents

have frequently staked out independent positions, favoring reconstitution in some cases, opposing it in others. Their presence at meetings has influenced board decisions because, unlike members of the two combatant groups, the union and the administration, the parents live in San Francisco and vote in elections.

The other sign that the district's emphasis on parental empowerment is having an impact on schools comes from visiting the schools themselves. I have had firsthand experiences at only a handful of schools, so I do not claim that my impressions are at all generalizable, but at those I have visited I have been struck by the extent to which parents work with faculty and feel a sense of ownership toward their school.

For example, in March 1998 I was asked to speak at E. R. Taylor Elementary School at a meeting of parents and teachers that was set up to determine how funds from a newly won Healthy Start grant would be used. The school was located in a predominantly black, low-income neighborhood known as Bayview, and most of the parents attending the meeting came from housing projects in the area. Before my speech, I met with a small group of parents and teachers who explained how much work they had put into writing the grant. One of the parents, a Samoan woman in her mid-forties who appeared to be a leader in the group, explained to me how the use of the funds would be prioritized:

We have a lot of children at this school who don't eat breakfast in the mornings. Some of them haven't seen an eye doctor or dentist. The people from the State Department said that this grant is a Healthy Start grant, which means it should be for the health of the children. Nothing else can come before that. We believe that healthy children will do better in school.

As the woman spoke, the rest of the group looked on, smiling and nodding with approval. It was clear to me that this woman, regardless of her lack of education or income, was the recognized leader in the group, not merely a token representative. After my speech, the same parent, not the principal who had originally contacted me, took it upon herself to invite me back to the school in three months to see the progress they had made toward achieving their goals.

What is most striking to me about this experience is how significantly it contrasts with my visits to most other urban schools. More often than not, in my conversations with teachers and administrators at urban public schools, parents are described as uncaring, dysfunctional, unsupportive, and part of the problem. Rather than being seen as partners capable of making meaningful contributions to the education of their children, they are more likely to be seen as obstacles in the way of progress, and as problems to be overcome.

This was the case at Berkeley High School, where for the longest time the poor academic performance of black and Latino students was explained as a by-product of parent disinterest in education. BHS is a relatively large school with approximately 3,000 students and more than 180 teachers, counselors, and administrators. According to the school district's data, approximately 40 percent of the students are white, 40 percent are African American, 10 percent are Latino, and 10 percent are

Asian American. Racial differences generally correspond to class differences in that the vast majority of white students are from middle-class and affluent backgrounds, while the majority of African American and Latino students come from low-income families.

To an outsider, the school seems amazingly diverse, but from within, racial fragmentation is apparent in almost every aspect of the school. On the basis of almost every significant indicator, BHS is a school that does not serve its black and Latino students well. Nearly 50 percent of black and Latino students who enter BHS in the ninth grade fail to graduate from the school, and among those who do graduate, few complete the course requirements necessary for admission to the University of California or the state college system (WASC Report 1996). These students also make up the overwhelming majority of students who are suspended or expelled for disciplinary reasons. Moreover, the adjunct continuation high school, which was established to serve students with poor attendance and behavioral problems, is almost entirely attended by African American and Latino students.

As might be expected, not only are African American students disadvantaged and marginal within the school community, but so are their parents. At most school activities that call for parental involvement and participation, African American and Latino parents are vastly underrepresented. This is also true on decisionmaking bodies where parents have a say in how resources are allocated, and it is most dramatically evident on the "back to school" nights, when parents are invited to meet their children's teachers. Historically, the auditorium where several hundred parents gather prior to visiting the classrooms is nearly entirely filled with white parents, with little more than a handful of black and Latino parents sprinkled throughout the crowd.

In 1996 a group that I helped to establish known as the Diversity Project began searching for ways to increase the involvement of parents who previously had been most marginal to the school.⁷ We did this because we believed that if we were going to be successful in our efforts to address disparities in academic achievement within the school, we would have to find ways to empower those who were most disenfranchised. We recognized that those who benefited under the present circumstances might perceive themselves as having a vested interest in preserving the status quo and resist efforts to support change that would produce greater equity. As we carried out our work, we positioned ourselves as facilitators of discussion rather than as advocates for a particular agenda, because we wanted to avoid becoming trapped in a polarized conflict over change at the school. It was our hope that organizing African American and Latino parents would provide us with a means to ensure that the change effort would not depend on our advocacy alone, and that once organized, the parents could also counterbalance the influence that would be exerted by the opponents of change.

Research in the form of a series of focus group discussions with parents served as our entrée into organizing. Focus group discussions were set up for Latino and African American parents to elicit their views on the state of the school. Specifically, we wanted to know what concerns they had about the education their children were receiving, what kinds of obstacles they encountered when interacting with

school officials on behalf of their children, and what kinds of changes they felt would help make BHS more receptive to their concerns.

Over the course of six months, more than seventy-five focus groups were conducted with more than four hundred parents. To ensure that maximum opportunity was provided for open communication, all of the sessions with Spanish-speaking parents were conducted in Spanish. Food and child care were also provided as an added incentive to attract high levels of participation. Finally, the focus groups were tape-recorded, the sessions were transcribed, and a report summarizing the issues raised was presented to a newly formed strategic planning committee for inclusion in its report to the school.

The parent outreach committee of the Diversity Project also recruited parents to join it in conducting the focus groups and carrying out the research. This was an important step, because the active core group of the committee is now taking leadership at the school in devising strategies aimed at institutionalizing parental involvement. The group has already persuaded the BHS administration to designate a surplus classroom to serve as a parent center, and they have written grants to foundations for the purpose of hiring two part-time parent organizers.

Aside from these accomplishments, there is other evidence that the organization of black and Latino parents is already beginning to have an impact on the school. At a community forum in May 1998 that was held for the purpose of soliciting responses to the plan as it was being drafted, nearly half of the parents present were African American or Latino. Most were parents who had become active in the leadership of the parent outreach group. During the meeting, several spoke openly about their criticisms of the plan and freely offered suggestions on what they would like to see included in it. After the meeting, several teachers commented that it was the first meeting they had attended in which the composition of the parents present matched that of the student body. The Diversity Project hopes to build on this accomplishment so that the ongoing effort to undermine racial inequality within the school is led and actively supported by the parents of the children who have the most to gain.

CONCLUSION

When parents are respected as partners in the education of their children, and when they are provided with organizational support that enables them to channel their interests to the benefit of the school, the entire culture of the organization can be transformed. Parents have a knowledge of their children's lives outside of school that teachers typically do not have, and that knowledge can prove helpful in developing effective pedagogical strategies (Ladson-Billings 1994). More important, the familiarity between school and parent that develops as a result of such partnerships can also begin to generate social closure and transform urban schools from alien and hostile organizations into genuine community assets.

There is evidence that in Chicago and San Francisco, two cities where efforts to empower parents have been most extensive, the academic performance of students is also improving (Hess 1995; Shirley 1997). There is also anecdotal evidence in

these communities that parents perceive themselves as exerting a greater degree of ownership and control over the schools their children attend. Realistically, such developments do not mean that urban schools that serve large numbers of poor children will suddenly be transformed into well-functioning organizations where children receive high-quality education. The obstacles present in low-income areas—joblessness, environmental degradation, crime, lack of access to social services, and so on—will not disappear because parents exercise leadership at local schools, and these external constraints will continue to have an impact on children, families, and schools. However, if we adopt the approach advocated by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1969, 154) and treat conditions of oppression as “limit situations” in which both the constraints and the possibilities for action are analyzed in relation to each other, then new ways of imagining change can be considered. This is not the same as exhortations to the powerless to pick themselves up by their boot straps or naive calls for volunteerism as strategies for alleviating poverty. Rather, it is a recognition that those victimized by poverty and marginalization have the capacity to act against it and, if supported with resources and allies, can do more to change social reality than any government program or philanthropic gesture. Such a recognition is premised on adopting a view of social conditions as something that can be acted upon rather than accepting them fatalistically as fixed and unchangeable.

I close with the words of Paulo Freire (1969, 155), who makes this point in clear and compelling terms:

To present this human world as a problem for human beings is to propose that they “enter into” it critically, taking the operation as a whole, their action, and that of others on it. . . . The more they review critically their past and present experiences in and with the world, the more they realize that the world is not a cul-de-sac for men and women, an unalterable state which crushes them.

NOTES

1. Bourdieu used the term “structural anecdote” in a seminar presented at the Institute for the Study of Social Change at the University of California at Berkeley in March 1986.
2. This finding is supported by a poll conducted in 1994 by Public Agenda (1994–1995) on behalf of the American Federation of Teachers and in California by a poll conducted by PACE (Policy Analysis for California Education, Berkeley, Calif.: The University of California) in March 1996.
3. Reconstitution is a strategy that was made available to the SFUSD as a result of the consent decree on school desegregation. The policy allows the district to reconstitute a school—remove all or part of the personnel from a school deemed low-performing—as a way to improve achievement for minority students. Since 1993, fourteen schools in the SFUSD have been completely or partially reconstituted.
4. My consulting work with the SFUSD has focused on an evaluation of the impact of the new admissions policy at Lowell High School on students admitted under the plan. For additional information on the work, see Noguera (1998).

5. Proposition 187, approved by voters in 1996, was intended to restrict undocumented aliens and their children from having access to public services. Proposition 209 was approved by voters in 1997 and eliminated the use of race and gender as factors that could be considered in admissions for higher education, employment, and contracting in publicly funded organizations. Passed in 1998, proposition 227 banned the use of bilingual education in public schools.
6. I have attended parent education workshops, honor roll marches, and issue-oriented events sponsored by all three centers. Each event drew a significant number of parents from constituencies not typically involved in school activities.
7. The Diversity Project is a research and reform collaboration that was created to find ways to reduce academic disparities among students at BHS. The project was established in 1996 and will continue its work through June 2000.

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Part III

Institutional Settings