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Transforming Urban Schools Through Investments in the Social Capital of Parents

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Pedro Noguera. Photo by Nic Paget-Clarke.

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 1990). The case is made for schools to become more responsive and supportive to the children, families and communities they serve by consciously developing partnerships based upon 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 1994; 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 1996; Lucas, et al. 1990). 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; Bryck 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 (Fratini, et al. 1990; 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 inner-city schools. A central feature of the analysis which will be presented in the forthcoming pages is on how 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 decision making 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 it will be shown 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 shall begin by recounting two experiences which 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 upon to speak to students and teachers, to organize workshops for parents, and to utilize my skills to assist in addressing some of the many problems facing urban schools. In many cases, I work on projects with parents, teachers and students in an attempt to improve conditions in schools through the use of action-oriented research. In some cases, I develop working relationships with schools based upon 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, etc., 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 peoples' 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 interactions between adults and children relate to the character of a particular school and the cultural norms that operate within. 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 my conversations with teachers, administrators and students, from examining school records, and by observing students in classrooms, on the playground or the school cafeteria, but the initial observations are often the most telling and informative.

Two 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, Bourdieu has referred to such examples or vignettes as "structural anecdotes" which he describes as "incidents in which the key structural elements are revealed". In his own use of this concept, Troy Duster (1989) suggests that structural anecdote 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 section that follows, 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 that 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 which she planned on submitting 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 40s - we were interrupted by one of her Assistant Principals, a Caucasian man in his mid to late 50s. 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 they sought an audience with the principal to explain their 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 outa here. If they need to talk to me about it, tell them they can wait, but its 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 found themselves in a situation where 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 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 50s, 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 at about 8:30 am, 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 10 or 11 years of age - entered the building laughing playfully with each other. At the moment of their arrival the principal stopped mid sentence 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 40s 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 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 teacher's lounge for our first meeting of the day.

These two vignettes provide profound insights into the ways in which what Bourdieu has termed cultural capital (1985) influences the character of interactions between school officials and the parents they serve; a phenomena 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 either sources of negative or positive social capital (Wacquant 1998; Gariulo and Beassi 1997; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Schools where academic failure is high and where 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 a 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 1998; Education Trust 1999; Edmonds 1978), 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 students they serve tend to rely heavily upon the support and cooperation of parents. As will be seen from the two case studies presented in the pages ahead, such cooperation can lead to the formation of social networks that can promote the broader interests of families residing in inner-city neighborhoods.

A key factor determining which form of social capital will be produced is the nature of the relationship that exist between the school - and the individuals that work there, and the community - including, but not limited to, 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 a genuine partnership based upon respect and a shared sense of responsibility exist between school and community, positive forms of social capital can be generated.

In the first vignette, a school rule - prohibition against assaulting another student - is applied with rigidity and without regard to 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 school official and the parent - a separation that may be based on differences in class and social status, as well as differences in roles/position. As an outsider in this situation who had not met the girl, her mother or family, I immediately assumed that the principal would only behave in such a callous manner if the parent and child were poor and black. I drew this conclusion because in my many visits to urban schools I have witnessed numerous occasions in which parents, especially African Americans and recent immigrants, are 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 less than prompt response to a request for help.

My assumption about the parent is confirmed when I encounter the group (parent, child, and

relatives) as I leave the principal's office. Agitated by the long wait and the sense that they have been wronged by the school rules, the family sits impatiently waiting for the principal in the adjoining office until our meeting is over. As I prepare to depart the principal walks past the group without acknowledging their presence and she walks me to the door; an action which I take as further evidence that in her eyes these people don't "count". Because the principal believes they have "problems" she feels no need to discuss "their side" of the issues, and feels completely justified in her resolve to deal sternly with the matter.

Given that both the principal and the parent are African American, it is not immediately clear how race or class may have influenced the nature of this interaction. However, what is clear is that the principal has all of the power in this situation, and she can determine how it will 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 a 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 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 1986; Maeroff 1988), such an imbalance will further the tendency for school to reproduce forms of inequality and undermine the interests of the communities they serve.

In the second vignette a different balance of power is in display. The sudden change in the attitude and behavior of the principal which I observe is triggered by the arrival of the middle class parent. In her presence, the students are no longer treated as mere wards of the school who can be scolded without retort and dispatched quickly to their classrooms. In her presence, the girls are treated as welcomed members of the school community, and the fact that they might have a legitimate reason for being late to school is suddenly taken into consideration. They are spoken to with kindness, and their middle class mother is accorded 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 elicits treatment premised upon respect. As an observer of the interaction I sense that the principal's change in tone and behavior is 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 or administrators in a public school (Nocera 1990). Unlike the parent in the first scenario, the middle class parent also possesses a powerful weapon that is typically inaccessible to the poor - the power to withdraw her children from that school if she is not satisfied with how she is served. An essential difference between the two parents in these examples, and between poor and middle class parents generally, is that middle class parents have the resources and wherewithal to assert their rights if they do not like the treatment that they or their children receive. In contrast, a poor parent is more likely to feel that the school her child attends is the only one available to her, and as such, the principal holds all of the power when the two meet. In any conflict, the principal has the ability to unilaterally exercise power 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 those described in the opening vignettes reveal some of the ways in which interactions between school administrators and parents are structured based on the distribution of power and social capital. When dealing with school personnel, the ability of parents to influence actions and decisions is often directly related to their level of education, class and status. Poor parents generally exercise less influence over school decisions, decisions that may directly affected the education of their children, than middle class parents (Fine 1994), 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 lack of power of poor parents is based upon 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 of 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 that exist 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 1977; Carnoy and Levin 1985; Katznelson and Weir 1988). They 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 - 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, 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, etc. - while the collective and cultural dimensions of school failure are ignored. (Apple: 91-102)

The fact that the production of winners and losers corresponds so closely with 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 is due in large part to hegemonic forces which condition popular attitudes and expectations such that the persistence of these patterns is expected and is perceived as "normal"(MacLeod 1987). For this reason, even during a period in which more public attention and resources are being directed toward education than at any other time in this nation's history (Cuban and Tyack 1994), little if any of the public discourse focuses on the issues and questions related to the role schools play in reproducing inequality.

Amidst all the outpouring of concern about the state of public education, often the factors that are seen as most relevant to those most directly involved in the educational process - access to resources and materials, the state of facilities, availability of trained professionals - receive little attention. There is little debate over the need to promote greater equity in funding between schools (Anyon 1997), 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 Schnieder 1994) possesses more than its share of failing schools. Nationally, drop-out rates at inner-city schools hover at around 50%, 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 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 have the potential to either contribute to the further decline of the quality of life in urban areas, or to serve as viable social assets that can 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 which 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, the lack of public services, etc. 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 neo-liberalism, 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 that social reforms can be initiated which can 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 1) serve as sources of intra-community integration, and 2) to provide resources for extra-community linkages. These forms of social capital have been identified by Coleman (1988) Woolcock (1998), Putnam (1995) and others as key elements of strategies that can be applied 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 which will derive from such developments will 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:

1) 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 access 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). The fact that they generally have stable funding and therefore follow fairly predictable operating procedures means that for many poor children, their attendance at school is the most consistent and stable aspect of their lives.

2) At an ideological level, the notion of equal opportunity through education continues to have broad appeal in American society. The first public schools were created in part because of broad popular support for the ideal that public schools were needed to insure some degree of equal opportunity (Katznelson and Weir 1986). Legal precedent continues to favor universal access to public education even though the right to an education is not guaranteed in the US constitution (Kirp 1982). Though there is little evidence of public support for radically equalizing funding between and among schools, there is considerable public support for utilizing education to extend opportunities to the lower class for social mobility through education.

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 it will be necessary to insure that resources are directed toward the development of social capital among inner-city residents. Specifically, strategies which encourage the development of organizations and networks that can exert influence over local schools and other neighborhood institutions are needed. As will be shown in the pages ahead, 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 will argue that to the extent that such outcomes can be realized, urban schools can become a powerful resource for community development and facilitate other forms of political and economic empowerment that can ultimately transform the

character and quality of life of urban areas, through bottom-up, grassroots initiatives.

Empowering a captured population

While structural factors related to the political economy of urban areas, and more specifically related to de-industrialization, globalization of the world economy, suburbanization, and middle class flight, have contributed to the isolation of the poor and have had a profound effect upon the character of urban areas (Wilson 1980; Massey and Denton 1993), factors 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. Sampson (1998) argues that when public institutions fail to adequately serve the needs of neighborhoods as is often the case with urban public schools (Payne 1986, 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"(1998:24).

As I pointed out in the two vignettes, a major difference distinguishing the middle class parent from the lower class parent is the power of choice. By virtue of the human capital (i.e. education and information) and economic capital they possess, middle class parents have the ability to leave a school if they do not like the way their children are treated or if they perceive the quality of education offered as inadequate. Leaving may mean enrolling a child in another public school or opting out of the system altogether by sending their child to a private school. However, leaving is not the only option available because middle class parents also have other resources at their disposal 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 Teachers Association), churches, or the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) to exert influence on school officials, or they can draw upon 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 may lack transportation to gain access to better schools in more affluent neighborhoods (Fuller 1996). Furthermore, unlike middle class parents, the ability of poor parents to fight for what they want is often limited 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; Kozol 1990; Comer 1981; Fine 1994).

For this reason, there is a need to consider how social capital - that which is derived from organization and association, can offset the relative powerlessness of low-income parents. Putnam (1994) suggest 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?" (1994:26) Within the context of economically depressed urban areas, I believe that to the extent parents and concerned community allies are able to marshal resources, organizational and legal, and expand their social networks in ways that enable them to increase the support they receive from churches, businesses, non-profit organizations, and established civic groups, urban schools can be transformed into community assets which more effectively respond to the needs of those they serve. This is because 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 the 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 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 lead to an improvement in 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 and the Board erupted when the Board, acting under the recommendation of the Superintendent, Rhody McCoy, called for the involuntary transfer of 18 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 citywide strike which brought public education in New York City to a halt for over 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: 1) a desire to improve schools in this low income neighborhood which had long been perceived as dysfunctional and of low quality; 2) 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, and the ideological aspirations of the Board, were invited to help implement this larger agenda of political empowerment.

Despite the controversy associated with what was being done in Ocean-Hill Brownsville, the call for greater community control of schools and other public services was a strategy that had been growing in popularity in anti-poverty 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." Similar proposals for greater community control over public services had been made with regard to the management of public housing and police departments, where citizens review boards were called for as a way of improving relations between community and police and reducing charges or police brutality (Currie and Skolnick 1994). While 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 that existed between schools and the communities they serve in many 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 19th century (Cremin, 1988; Katznelson and Weir 1986; Tyack 1982). Kenneth Clark, the psychologist who championed racial integration of schools, articulated the fundamental logic of the proposal in this way:

> 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 PTA's 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. (Fantini, et al. 1970)

While a certain degree of control might be taken for granted in middle class suburban schools, within the context of 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 sociologist Daniel P. Moynihan, 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 others who condemned the Ocean Hill- Brownsville experiment as

"too political" (Schrag 1969), and "overly ambitious" (Ferretti 1968).

Ultimately, it was the UFT strike and Mayor John Lindsay's (who initially supported the plan) capitulation to the teachers' union, which brought an end to community control in Ocean Hill-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 is often true with other policy innovations - the idea of improving urban schools through various forms of decentralized management and parental empowerment, has re-surfaced in recent years and gained new credibility. Community control is no longer the title affixed to these initiatives, but throughout the country, reforms aimed at increasing parent involvement in school on decision making bodies has become popular. The Comer model is one of the more well known reform strategies that advocates such an approach (Comer 1988). Site-based management is another, though typically it leads to greater power for school personnel than parents in the decision making 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 1999). The most widely heralded of these initiatives is the Chicago Local School Council initiative which was approved by the Chicago State Legislature in 1989, and the community/parent organizing efforts led by the IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation) in Texas (Shirley 1999). Ironically, both models possess similarities to the older Ocean Hill-Brownsville experiment of 1968, though the similarity has never been acknowledged by the policy makers 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. While 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 express greater satisfaction over the quality of their schools since these reforms have gone into effect (Wong 1998; Education Trust 1999; Shirley 1999).

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 Woolcock (1998) and others (Sampson 1998; Putnam 1995), poor communities are typically characterized by what Wilson (1989) describes as social isolation caused by concentrations of poverty and a lack of extra-community linkages. In some cases, poor urban areas may also have weak intra-community ties due to the physical and economic deterioration of the community (Greenberg and Schnieder 1988), high levels of distrust among residents, a lack of formal and informal civic associations, and what Banfield has termed "amoral familism". However, even when such ties do exist at either a neighborhood (Jacobs 1961; Whyte 1981) or 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 serve as a basis for 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 upon neighborhoods, bringing together residents who might otherwise have no reason to interact (Noguera 1996). Of course, the interaction required is often limited to making sure that children attend school, and most of the mixing that occurs happens among children. However, through connections created by children, parents are frequently brought into contact with one another, and there is the potential 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 offer the potential for creating or enhancing a key aspect of social capital -- intra-community ties.

Schools also offer the possibility of serving as a medium through which low income parents can develop extra-community linkages to actors, which can provide access to resources. Local schools are typically connected to larger districts and political institutions. By gaining control over local

schools, there is a possibility that parents can 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 will describe how efforts aimed at empowering parents can lead to the development of social capital and can be used to facilitate school improvement in urban areas. These examples are drawn from two cases that I have worked closely with: Berkeley High School and the San Francisco Unified School District. There are undoubtedly other examples of schools and school districts in other cities that have employed similar strategies. However, I've 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, first hand 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 or not participation is genuine and authentic, or whether those said to be empowered actually feel that way (Fine 1994).

Putnam (1995) 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." (1995:35-36) Coleman applies the concept of closure to his analysis of social capital to argue that norms and sanctions on behavior which support group goals and aspirations only develop when "the trustworthiness of social structures allows for the proliferation of obligations and expectations."(1988:107)

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 that 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 which are supported by families.

Building on Coleman's point, I will 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 1997). As part of Superintendent Waldemar Rojas' strategy for raising student achievement, the following policies and actions have been taken: 1) An office of parent relations has been established for the purpose of coordinating communication between the district and parents; 2) Parent centers, located in poor neighborhoods and aimed specifically at Latino, Asian and African American parents have been funded and developed; 3) A variety of community-based mobilizations, including marches, conferences, and rallies, have been organized for the purpose of generating active parental participation in school and district-wide affairs; 4) 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 district-wide 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 decision-making authority at schools that have been reconstituted, particularly in the selection of new teachers and administrators.

Documenting the impact of these strategies is difficult. Test scores and other key indicators of student performance (i.e. grades, graduation rates, admission to college, etc) for all ethnic groups have risen steadily for each of the six years that the plan has been in place, but there is no way of knowing 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 first hand how the district's emphasis on parental empowerment has influenced the character of discussion of educational

issues at the site and district level. 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 which has attracted over 800 parents on each of the three years it has been held. Most significant for me was the fact that the District provided transportation, translation and childcare, 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 (e.g. how to help your child with homework, how to be an advocate for your child, things you should know about college, etc), 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. All three of the parent centers previously mentioned were created as a result of the conferences, and each of the centers currently report active involvement at workshops and other events for parents, which they sponsor at schools in the community.

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, that reconstitution is too heavy-handed and disruptive; for the administration, 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 the two combatants - 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 only had first hand experiences at a handful of schools, so I do not claim that my impressions are at all generalizable, but at those I've 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, 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 40s, 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.” (Site visit 3/18/98)

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, and not merely a token representative. After my speech, the same parent, and not the principal who had originally contacted me, took it upon herself to invite me back to the school in three months to see what kind of 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 obstacles in the way of progress, and problems to be overcome.

This was the case at Berkeley High School (BHS), where for the longest time, the poor academic performance of black and Latino students, was explained as by-product of parent disinterest in education. BHS is a relatively large school with approximately three thousand students and over one hundred and eighty teachers, counselors and administrators. According to the school district's data, approximately 40% of the students are White, 40% are African American, 10% are Latino and 10% 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 fifty 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 at the University of California, or the state college system (WASC Report 1996). These students also comprise 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 comprised of 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 decision making bodies where parents have a say in how resources are allocated, and it is most dramatically evident on the back-to-school nights where parents are invited to meet their children's teachers. Historically, the auditorium where several hundred parents gather prior to visiting the classrooms of their children's teachers is nearly entirely white 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 school. 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 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 might resist efforts to support change that produces 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 sought to prevent ourselves from 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 insure that the change effort would not be dependent upon our advocacy alone, and that once organized, the parents could also serve to 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 entree 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, over 75 focus groups were conducted with over four hundred parents. To insure that maximum opportunity was provided for open communication, all of the sessions with Spanish speaking parents were conducted in Spanish. Food and childcare 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 their report to the school.

The parent outreach committee of the Diversity Project also recruited parents to join them in conducting the focus groups and carrying out the research. This was important 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 gotten the BHS administration to designate a surplus classroom, which will be used 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 upon the school. At a community forum in May of 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 and Latino. Most of these 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 that they had attended in which the composition of the parents present matched that of the student body. The Diversity Project hopes to build upon this accomplishment in the future 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, which enables them to channel their interests to the benefit of the school, the entire culture of the organization can be transformed. Parents have knowledge of children's lives outside of school, which teachers typically do not have, and that knowledge can prove helpful in developing effective pedagogical strategies (Ladson-Billings 1994). More importantly, 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 aimed at empowering parents have been most extensive, that the academic performance of students is also improving (Hess 1995; Shirley 1999). 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 which 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, etc., 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 Brazilian educator Paulo Friere 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 (Friere 1969: 154) then new ways of imagining change can be considered. This is not the same as calling for the powerless to pick themselves up by their bootstraps or naive calls for volunteerism as strategies for alleviating poverty. It is rather 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 coming to perceive 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 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. (1969:155)

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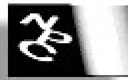
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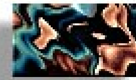
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