DESCRIPTORS- *NEGROES, *LOWER CLASS, *SOCIAL INFLUENCES,
*ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT, *COMMUNITY STUDY, CHILDREN, FAMILY
INFLUENCE, SCHOOL COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIP, FAMILY SCHOOL
RELATIONSHIP, SOCIAL STRUCTURE,

    THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY
AS INFLUENCES ON ACHIEVEMENT OF LOWER-CLASS NEGROES WERE
STUDIED IN AN ALL-NEGRO SUBURB OF A LARGE NORTHERN CITY.
THESE VARIABLES WERE EXAMINED WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF CURRENT
HYPOTHESES OFFERED IN THE LITERATURE ON CULTURAL
DISADVANTAGE. THE FOCUS OF THE STUDY WAS ON THREE RESEARCH
AREAS--(1) FAMILY BACKGROUND FACTORS WHICH MIGHT SUPPORT
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT, (2) THE ROLE OF SOCIAL DISTANCE
VARIABLES IN SCHOOL-FAMILY INTERACTION, AND (3) THE DEGREE TO
WHICH SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS AND "SCHOOL POLITICS" AFFECT
ACHIEVEMENT. THE DATA, OBTAINED THROUGH QUESTIONNAIRES,
INTERVIEWS, SCHOOL RECORDS, AND INFORMAL CONVERSATIONS,
INDICATED THAT SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES WERE THE MOST
SIGNIFICANT PREDICTORS OF ACHIEVEMENT. THE DATA DID NOT
SUPPORT THE CAUSAL THEORIES ON SCHOOL-FAMILY RELATIONS
PROPOSED IN THE LITERATURE. RATHER, THE FINDINGS SUGGESTED
THAT EDUCATIONAL ISSUES SHOULD BE STUDIED WITHIN A SPECIFIC
SOCIAL STRUCTURAL CONTEXT. (NH)

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SOCIOLOGICAL INFLUENCES ON THE ACHIEVEMENT OF LOWER CLASS NEGRO CHILDREN

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November 1967

University of Chicago

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SOCIOLOGICAL INFLUENCES ON THE ACHIEVEMENT
OF LOWER CLASS NEGRO CHILDREN

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION:

Initially, this study, which developed a broad focus, was to concentrate only on how the sociological character-istics of Negro families affected the childrens' school per-formance and perspectives. Social scientists from many fields have had something to say about the causes of poor educational achievement among lower class Negro chil-dren. A large amount of material on the subject has appeared in the last few years (1, 10, 11, 15, 14), but little of a conclusive nature has emerged from these studies. The lack of balance between theory and research provided the impetus to this study.

In particular, much has been written on the "cultural deprivation" of the Negro child and the effect this phenomenon presumably has on his academic achievement. In general the social scientists seemed to agree that the family background of the child was especially important. For example: Drake and Cayton (4) pointed out that within a lower class commun-ity, differences between the "respectable" lower class and the "underworld" characters might prove important; Dave (3) suggested that family procedures for socializing their children to achievement might have a dramatic effect upon achievement and he produced very strong results to back up this theory; Kahl (6) investigated dimensions of "achieve-ment orientation"--attitudes and values which might be cen-tral in the promotion of achievement; and Weiner and Murray (16) studied parental attitudes about the value of education as well as educational aspirations and expectations for their children. In addition, I have felt that the area of racial socialization--how parents approach the task of explaining the racial facts of life to their children--deserved more notice than has been accorded previously.

The research program was to test the hypotheses already suggested in the literature, using data from school records, child questionnaires and parent interviews. Origin-ally it was planned to conduct the research within an inner-city neighborhood but problems of access led to a shift in site to a virtually all-Negro suburb of a northern metropolis. As the study progressed, it soon became evident that the problem of underachievement, at least in this village, lay in the larger surroundings and could not fully be studied in the limited context of the family and child alone. Thus the areas of school-family relations and school-community relations were added to the study.

-1-

There have been several studies (5, 9, 12) concerning
the hypothesis that one prerequisite of high educational
achievement in lower class Negro communities is extensive
contact and co-operation between the family and the school.
Once this sort of intensive interaction between home and
school is established, it is hypothesized, the two organi-
zations will be able to coordinate their activities in such
a way as to maximize achievement. This theory alone is
not sufficient, however, for it lacks good empirical docu-
mentation and ignores many basic characteristics of the
structure of the school and family.

Selznick(13) has pointed out that the maintenance of
organizational integrity and the development and functioning
of boundary roles and boundary organizations are involved
in the area of school-family relations, and Litwak and
Meyer (7) have pointed out that special difficulties arise in
such programs due to the fundamental difference between
the bureaucratic nature of the school and the primary group
characteristics of the family. Sexton (14) has pointed out
that social status differences are likely to hinder the free
exchange of information necessary for the establishment
of the type of co-operation proposed between family and
school.

During the course of the collection of data on the
school-family relations, certain compelling facts emerged
which broadened the research task even more. It became
evident that the topic of school-community relations was
a potent one in the community and deserved inclusion in
the study not only because of indications evident in the
course of interviews with teachers, but also because of
the fact that "Low Water" (the community studied) was
located on the rural-urban fringe and its problems might
well be tied into the strains of incorporating a rural town
into the outlying reaches of a sprawling metropolis.

Three research areas, therefore, made up the body
of the project. In the first area, family support for aca-
demic achievement, five specific aspects of family back-
ground were investigated as potential influences upon achieve-
ment: (1) Preschool learning; (2) Parental values and atti-
tudes relevant to achievement; (3) Racial socialization pro-
cedures; (4) Physical aspects of the home environment, and;
(5) Family activities designed to encourage achievement.

In the second area, school-family relations, the prob-
lem was to determine how well day-to-day interactions between

the school and family were described by a model developed in the cultural deprivation literature (5, 9). This model suggests that one reason achievement is low in poverty-stricken areas is that little contact, communication and co-operation occurs between the school and the family. The parents and teachers are separated by substantial social distance characterized by fear, suspicion, or even outright hostility. This social distance is supposed to be rooted in the social class or racial differences between parents and teachers. The causal model which is implied by this approach may be drawn as follows:

socio-economic ⟶ heightened ⟶ lowered parent-
status differences ↗ social distance ↗ teacher contact.

⟶ deficient pupil
achievement and
behavior
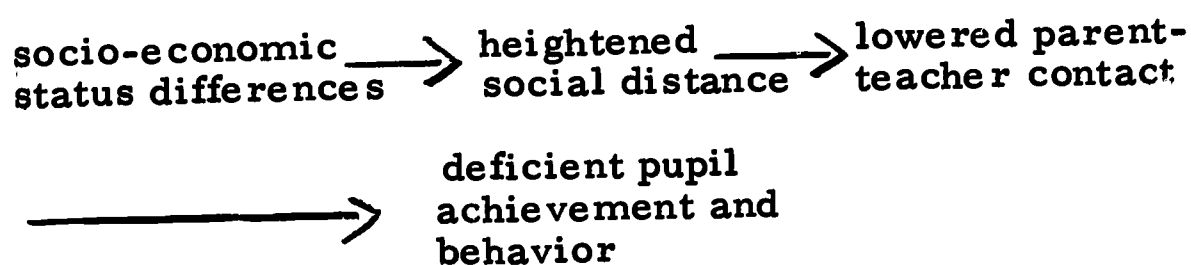
Only anecdotal evidence had been given in support of the model. It seemed problematic primarily because it failed to take into account basic structural characteristics of the family and the school.

The third area was school-community relations and school politics, which appeared to be especially important because certain groups within the community were highly critical of the schools and their actions toward the school were colored by their hostility. A great deal of conflict and controversy centered around the major structural link between the community and the schools--the school board. It seemed likely that a full understanding of this conflict would be a key to an understanding of the social structure of the community and its effects upon education.

METHOD:

The small Negro community where the study was conducted was within easy commuting distance of Midwest Metropolis. To preserve its anonymity, and to reflect the primary characteristic of the community, the pseudonym of Low Water was chosen. Understanding the community is a prerequisite to understanding the research design. The community is a "pocket of poverty." A recent study which ranked all the suburbs of Midwest Metropolis in terms of prestige and social status placed Low Water next to the lowest out of 106 communities. The major part of the village looks much like farm towns in the rural portions

of Mississippi and Georgia. There are dirt roads, tar-
paper shacks with no running water, and abandoned cars
throughout the center of the village. Yet on its periphery
are three developments of low-cost private homes which
have attracted working class Negroes from Midwest Metro-
polis. Thus, the community is both a semi-rural pocket
of poverty and a working class suburb.

Thirty years ago Low Water was a very small farm
town with a dominant white population which controlled the
town. With the advent of World War II, streams of Negroes
began to migrate from the South in search of work in the
factories. From 1940 on, the minority groups began to
grow and as they did so, the white population began to
leave. By 1950 virtually the entire village was populated
by minority group persons. The leadership positions in
the community, with the exception of superintendant of
schools, were all filled by Negroes. At about 1950 corrup-
tion is said to have started in the community. Although
nothing has ever been proven in a court of law, there
have been numerous allegations of underhanded dealings
involving both the village government and the school district.

In 1960 both public and private housing developments
came to Low Water. The private housing developments
which attracted working class Negroes from Midwest Metro-
polis were built. While many of the new residents live close
to the margin, and some have failed to keep up their pay-
ments and have had to move back to the city, the major pro-
portion of these new residents consider Low Water a suburb--
a place to which they came at least partly to improve the
lives of their children. As they became active in community
affairs, they soon became convinced that Low Water was
thoroughly inefficient, backward and corrupt. Some left,
but many accepted the community or decided to fight for
reform. Thus a split was created between the Oldtimers,
who were opposed to the Reformers, and the Reformers,
who were joined by a few of the long time residents.

Familial Support for Achievement:

Data on familial support for achievement were
gathered from three major sources: the interviews with
the 201 mothers of fourth and sixth grade children in the
local schools; questionnaires filled out by the children
themselves; and school records. The interviews with the
mothers were conducted by working class Negro women in
the homes of the respondents. The major topics covered
were the social background of the family and its actions

-4-

and attitudes regarding the community, its schools, and education in general. These interviews were quite extensive and included both open and closed ended questions. Over 90 percent of the mothers of children in the two school grades were interviewed. The pupil questionnaires were completed by 353 children and consisted of one hundred "yes" and "no" items. These items were designed to gather information about attitudes and values as well as additional data about the home environment. The school records furnished grades, and achievement and intelligence test scores which served as dependent variables. In placing these respondents in the larger context of Low Water, two dimensions--length of residence and economic well-being--were made and analysed. Those who settled in the community before 1960 were referred to as the Oldtimers. For the "welfare ratio" we followed Morgan (8) in distinguishing the poor from the others by defining the poor as those having a welfare ratio of .9 or less. An additional cutting point of .5 or less was used to separate the truly destitute from the rest of the poor.

There were two major steps in the analysis of these data. First, simple cross-tabulations were used to discover how familial support for achievement varied within the social structure of the community. In order to ascertain the importance of six sets of family background variables upon achievement, a series of multiple regression analyses was performed. First, each of the sets of variables were regressed as a group upon the achievement measures. Thus, multiple correlation coefficients were determined which served as indicators of the predictive power of each group as a group. Then the variables within each group which had contributed significantly to the regression equation were selected and pooled into new sets. Then these sets, representing the most powerful predictors of each dependent variable, were regressed against the achievement measures. This last procedure made it possible to ascertain the relative importance of the variables under each heading and the total predictive power of these variables in combination.

School-Family Relations:

To study school-family relations, we relied heavily upon informal conversations with teachers and also upon a brief questionnaire which they completed. The questionnaire dealt with the nature and extent of contacts which the teachers had had with the parents of each of their students during

the year. Some data from the interviews with the mothers were also useful.

School-Community Relations and School Politics:

School-community relations and school politics were examined by extensive semi-structured interviews with community actors on both sides of the major school conflict. In addition, interviews with the present and past superintendents of schools and with other school personnel provided significant insights. Sixteen persons associated with social service agencies concerned with Low Water were also interviewed. Newspaper articles and school board election documents provided still other sources of data. Finally, a quick follow-up survey of the mothers in the sample was conducted in order to ascertain their voting patterns in school elections.

RESULTS:

The first findings were on the social structure of the community. When the two variables were combined, six statistical categories emerged in describing the social structure of Low Water:

Welfare Ratio

		moderate	low	very low
length of residence	less than seven years	working class Newcomers (New Workers)	poor Newcomers	destitute Newcomers
	seven years or more	working class Oldtimers (Old Workers)	poor Old-timers	destitute Oldtimers

This typology largely organizes the significant variations in numerous social background characteristics which exist in the community. Families were very large and the number of children varied inversely with economic welfare. Newcomers tended to have smaller families. Regardless of length of residence, broken homes were concentrated among the very poorest residents. Most of the destitute families were Oldtimers. The destitute Oldtimers were almost totally rural in background, while the New Workers were the most urban group. Oldtimers were less likely to be recent migrants from the South, and recency of migration was related slightly to economic well-being.

Two facts stood out concerning objective measures of socio-economic status. Newcomers were not consistently higher than the Oldtimers on any of the measures of socio-economic status; thus, being new to the community could not automatically be equated with financial well-being. It was also apparent that the welfare ratio was closely related to traditional measures of socio-economic status.

Two subjective measures of the family's social position were also used. Following Centers (2), class identification was measured. The majority at all levels identified themselves as working class. There was some variation with the welfare ratio--among the destitute the Newcomers were more willing to admit belonging to the lower class and less likely to identify themselves as middle class than the Oldtimers. On the measure which asked how well they felt life was going for them, New Workers almost unanimously reported that things had been getting better--more so than among the Oldtimers-- while the reverse was true among the Destitute.

Concerning adaptation to the community as a whole, satisfaction varied with socio-economic status among Newcomers but not among Oldtimers. New Workers were the most satisfied although this could be interpreted as satisfaction with the housing development rather than with the community as a whole. New Workers stood out as the most integrated into the community while the destitute Newcomers were the least integrated. Kinship played a part in this, however, for the Oldtimers were more likely than Newcomers to have relatives in Low Water. The likelihood of kinship in the community was high in all parts of the social structure, however. All three of these variables were systematically related to economic well-being among the Newcomers, but not among the Oldtimers. Those Newcomers with adequate incomes were most satisfied with Low Water and most closely tied into a neighboring pattern there. On the other hand, Newcomers who were poor or destitute had more relatives there but were still lower on satisfaction and integration into the neighborhood.

The children of the high status Newcomers were the most likely to show evidence of substantial pre-school learning, to have parents who had high educational expectations, and to have come from homes with some physical advantages and within which some achievement-promoting activities were common. On the other hand, the parents

of these children had relatively weak achievement orien-
tations and tended to have racial attitudes which were
thought unlikely to promote achievement. Furthermore,
the superiority of these families in terms of advantages
of the physical environment and intellectually stimulating
activities was far from complete. However, many of
the homes of the most destitute Oldtimers offered consid-
erable support for achievement, and when asked how much
education they would like their children to have, over 80
percent of all mothers said they would like to have their
children go to college. The expectation that the collegiate
experience would actually be achieved varied directly
with the economic welfare of the families.

The data failed to support any of the links in the
causal chain regarding school-family relations proposed
in the cultural deprivation literature. Social class was
found not to be related to social distance between school
and family in the way suggested, and social distance
proved to be largely unrelated to contacts. School-initiated
contact was found to have a strong negative relationship
with achievement, and parent-initiated contact was found
to have a very weak relationship in the same direction.
Furthermore, the causal direction appeared to be from
achievement to contact rather than the reverse.

The school politics of Low Water were found to
center around control of the school board. It was conclu-
ded that the conflict could be viewed as a struggle between
the two major social groups, the Oldtimers and the Reformers,
for the prestige, power, and authority associated with
membership in the major boundary organization between
the families and the schools of the community.

DISCUSSION:

Familial Support for Achievement:

Few results came from the 100 item "yes" and "no"
questionnaire filled out by the children in the classrooms.
The questions were read aloud by an articulate woman while
her husband went about the class answering questions as
they arose. The instrument was designed to yield detailed
information about familial achievement socialization and
the educational and occupational attitudes, aspirations,
and expectations of the children. Despite the care in develop-
ment, pretesting and administration of the questionnaire it
appears to have been largely a failure. When the items

were factor analyzed, a large number of very small
factors emerged, but careful examination of the inter-
correlations between very similar test items revealed
very low and sometimes negative correlations. It
appeared as if the children had answered randomly.
Hence, some factual data on family characteristics
from the questionnaire was used, but attitude data were
deleted due to their apparent low reliability.

As a group, social and demographic variables
were found to be the most important predictors of achieve-
ment. However, these and other concrete factors de-
clined in importance from the fourth to the sixth grade,
while parental attitudes and values increased in importance.

School-Family Relations:

These findings were reinterpreted in terms of an-
other theoretical framework. This approach emphasized
the fact that both the schools and the families are social
organizations and that, as such, they have boundaries,
internal dynamics, and limited resources which can be
applied to the solution of organizational problems. Both
systems are at least minimally committed to a common
goal, the promotion of high achievement within the younger
generation. In addition, both organizations recognize
the importance of co-operating to achieve this common end.
However, they both also share the feature that contact
and communication between parent and teacher may pose
a threat to their boundaries and organizational integrity.
Given a situation characterized by potential costs and very
uncertain rewards, under normal conditions both the school
and the family tend to avoid, or at least not to seek, contact.
However, when the child's achievement and/or behavior
is much poorer than the expectations of the parent or teacher,
a conference is called. Usually this contact is initiated by
the school, but sometimes the parents seek conferences
on their own. The high status Newcomers were found to
be much more likely than others to seek such contact and
much less likely to have been called in by the teachers to
school for a conference.

School-Community Relations and School Politics:

The school politics of Low Water had four distinct
historical stages: (1) a period of concensus, stability and
rumors of corruption; (2) the reformist take-over; (3) the
resurgence of the Oldtimers; and (4) the demoralization
of the Reformers. The Reformers saw the Oldtimer-

dominated board as a threat to the organizational integrity
of the school system. This threat was alleged to have
resulted from financial wrongdoings and from domination
of the superintendent by the board. On the other hand,
the Oldtimers viewed the Reformers as a potential threat
to the schools, the families, and the school board itself.
The Reformists were thought to be spendthrifts who squandered
money on educational frills and thereby put a heavy financial
burden on the schools and, ultimately, the individual
families within the community. The Reformist superin-
tendent had, in their view, usurped the traditional and
legitimate powers of the board. Finally, some Oldtimers
apparently sincerely felt that the Reformers were power-
hungry Communists and Communist dupes.

On the whole, the study showed that educational
affairs must be studied in their particular social structural
context. In Low Water, economic status was not the only
important social structural variable. The differences
between the Oldtimers and Newcomers in terms of their
attitudes toward the community and toward its educational
system proved central to understanding educational affairs
in Low Water. In other communities, racial, ethnic, gen-
erational or religious cleavages might prove central.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The over-all conclusion of the study is that in order
to understand the dynamics of education in Low Water it is
necessary to understand its social structure. The major
findings, therefore, emphasize the importance of viewing
educational affairs in their community context. In addition,
they have implications for sociological theory and research
as well as for policy directions.

The children of high status Newcomers were the most
likely to show evidence of preschool learning, to have par-
ents who had high educational expectations, and to have
come from homes with some physical advantages and within
which some achievement-promoting behaviors were common.
On the other hand, the parents of these children had rela-
tively low achievement orientations (as measured by a scale
given in Kahl [6]) and tended to have racial attitudes
which were thought unlikely to promote achievement. Fur-
thermore, the superiority of these homes in terms of
physical accouterments and intellectually stimulating acti-
vities was far from complete. Over eighty percent of the
mothers said they would like their children to go to college.

Virtually every destitute mother in Low Water had colle-
giate aspirations for her child, but relatively few expected
these hopes to be fulfilled. It was found that many homes
of the destitute Oldtimers offered considerable support
for achievement.

It was also found, that as a group, social and demo-
graphic variables were the most important predictors of
achievement. However, these and other concrete factors
declined in importance from the fourth to the sixth grade
while parental attitudes and values increased in importance.

The causal model concerning family-school rela-
tions and achievements was found to be inadequate. Social
class was shown not to be related to social distance in the
way suggested and social distance was found to be largely
unrelated to contact. Finally, contact was found to be
negatively related to achievement, with the causal direc-
tion being the reverse of that which was hypothesized.
These findings were reinterpreted in the light of organi-
zation theory, realizing that both the schools and the fam-
ilies are social organizations and that as such they have
boundaries, internal dynamics, and limited resources
which can be applied to the solution of organizational
problems. In order to co-operate with each other, but
not break down the boundaries that exist, the school and
the families support a boundary organization--the Parent-
Teachers association--and a boundary role--the school
social worker. Given the potential costs and uncertain
rewards of close relations, both the family and the school
tend to avoid contacts wherever possible. Whenever there
was a serious problem, usually the teacher initiated a
conference. These school-initiated contacts are the most
common types of interaction between parents and school
personnel in Low Water and both parties find them unplea-
sant occurences, the parent because he feels compelled
to defend his child against criticisms and the teacher
because he saw this reaction as another indication that
most parents are apathetic and uninterested in their
childrens' achievement. Parent-initiated contact was
less common and less clearly related to achievement.
Some schools regard this as an invasion of privacy, but
in Low Water such visits are taken as evidence of the
parents' interest. The Reformers were most likely to
initiate such contact and the least likely to have been
called in for a conference with the teacher.

Four stages in the history of the school politics were identified--(1) concensus and apathy; (2) Reformist takeover; (3) resurgence of the Oldtimers; and, (4) demoralization of the Reformers and consolidation of power by the Oldtimers. This conflict was viewed as a struggle between two major social groups for the prestige, power and authority associated with membership in the major boundary organization between the families and the schools of the community. The Reformers saw the Oldtimers as a threat to the organizational integrity of the school system. The Oldtimers viewed the Reformers as a potential threat to the schools, the families, and the school board itself.

This study should illustrate the fact that the sociology of education need not be as dull and sterile as it has been in the past. The story of Low Water's schools makes it clear that interesting and exciting events do occur in educational affairs. Still, there is practically no descriptive material on such events. Comparative case studies on the school's functioning in different communities are sorely needed. Perhaps as social scientists come to recognize some of the many theoretical implications of school-community relations, they will be spurred to go out and investigate them.

The most obvious implication in the findings of the social history of Low Water is that the social history of a community can give important insights into its present social structure. Certainly the social types, the Oldtimers and the Reformers, are best understood in an historical context. An historical viewpoint is also important in that it forces one to pay attention to long term social trends and, thus, to social change and to go out in the field and talk to people in the community. One hypothesis worth investigating is that school conflict in low-income suburban areas is due to suburbanization and the concomitant conflicts between the social groups rather than to a lack of skill in conflict management. Furthermore, it may be found that residents of poverty villages will not like their first taste of the relatively heterogenous, modern, urban society and will, therefore, reject it in favor of more socially homogeneous poverty. Thus residents of such communities would do well to consider the potential gains and costs of constructing public housing tracts to attract urbanites.

-12-

The data concerning familial support of achievement supports the general conclusion that family background has important effects upon achievement. In addition, they indicate that a family's social class is not the only one of its characteristics which is important in this regard. Its position on other dimensions of social stratification within the community may be important. In this study the differentiation between Oldtimers and Reformers was useful. The researcher who is interested in education in the community setting would do well to spend some time trying to find out the peculiarities of the local social structure, rather than assuming that social class is the only really important variable.

The data suggest that within social strata or social types there is considerable variation in terms of the specific ways in which the family supports education. Further research is needed to specify and measure more precisely the most important of these. Then it may prove possible to develop specific programs to help low income families realize their educational aspirations.

Also, there is considerable room for theoretical development and further research with regard to the changes in the importance and patterns of familial influence upon achievement over time. Panel studies of the relationships between physical and attitudinal characteristics and achievement are in order. Although family background has proved an important influence upon achievement, it has not come close to explaining all the variations in achievement in Low Water. More extensive work should be done in evaluating the impact of peer groups, teachers, relatives and other agencies of socialization upon achievement.

Insofar as the family background has proven to be important, governmental programs to improve the social and economic condition of depressed minority groups are likely to have a payoff in improved achievement. However, the data show that there are other influences and that there is room for the school and other agencies to promote achievement. Thus, the defeatist attitude among teachers of the culturally deprived is unjustified. Teachers should be taught that achievement is not strictly determined by social or economic status.

It appears that the social organizational framework developed here fits the day-to-day reality of school-family

relationships in depressed areas much better than that
proposed by the cultural deprivation literature. Case
studies of the type, extent, and effectiveness of parent-
teacher interactions and school strategies regarding
these in communities of varying socio-economic and
racial composition are badly needed. This is an area
where controlled social experiments are also possible
and should be tried. If this framework proves useful
in describing the dynamics of relations between schools
and families in many different communities, it may also
prove useful in describing the relationships between other
public-serving organizations and their publics.

With regard to policy about school-family rela-
tions, it seems necessary to begin with more research
to establish the conditions under which they are likely
to have a favorable impact upon achievement and under
which they are not. Only after these tasks have been
accomplished would it seem useful to make specific
policy recommendations. However, assuming that
such investigations do prove school-family contacts to
be important in promoting achievement, the following
steps would seem appropriate: (1) establish incentives
for individual teachers who have the qualifications and
the desire to relate to the families to do so; (2) establish
programs using school-community co-ordinators, and;
(3) construct social structural safeguards against intru-
sion into what are considered to be the internal dynamics
of the family and the school, realizing that what might be
seen as interference in one community might not in
another.

Investigations into school board issues are likely
to yield significant insights into the central valuational
and financial cleavages within the community, especially
in areas like Low Water which are undergoing rapid
social change. If it is true that the Oldtimers have mis-
used their offices on the school board, it is at least partly
because neither formal nor informal sanctions were applied
to them. State laws could be passed which could make
all school records and transactions more easily accessible
to public purview. However, where the citizens are too
poor, uneducated, apathetic and disorganized to exercise
their option to'throw the rascals out" at the time of elec-
tions, events like those found in Low Water are likely to
continue. In this community it seems likely that the Old-
timers are kept in office, despite the scandals, chiefly
because they oppose the forces of urbanization, modernity

bureaucratization, liberalism, and perhaps, snobbery which the Reformers represent. In that sense they represent the will of the majority of the residents.

This raises the issue of local versus state or national control of education. One's immediate reaction to the scandals of Low Water might be to call for scrapping of local boards while increasing both state and federal control. If this were done it is quite possible that many of the scandals would disappear. At the same time, however, the major boundary organization between the family and the school would be lost. Variations between communities in terms of definition of the boundaries and vital functions of the schools and families would probably not be taken into account. Intermediate measures which would call for increased professionalization of school administration and teachers along with state and national codes would probably be the best alternative.

The full report of this study is available as a dissertation:
The Schools and Social Structure of an Economically
Depressed Negro Community, by Robert J. Parelius.
Department of Sociology, University of Chicago,
November 1967.

SUMMARY

This study was carried out in a virtually all-Negro suburb of a Northern Metropolis to determine the socio- logical influences on the poor achievement of lower class Negro children. We decided to test the hypotheses al- ready suggested in the literature concerning the area of the "culturally deprived" child and the effects the family has on the child's achievement. The scope of the study was widened and the areas of school-family relations and school-community relations were added when it became apparent that in "Low Water" (the community studied) the problem lay in the larger surroundings and could not be fully studied in the limited contexts of the family and child alone.

Three research areas, therefore, made up the body of the project. In the first area--family support for academic achievement--five specific aspects of family background were investigated as potential influences upon achievement: (1) Pre-school learning; (2) Parental values and attitudes relevant to achievement; (3) Racial socialization procedures; (4) Physical aspects of the home environment, and; (5) Family activities designed to encour- age achievement.

In the second area--school-family relations--the prob- lem was to determine how well day-to-day interactions be- tween the school and family were described by a model developed in the cultural deprivation literature (5, 9). This model suggested that one reason achievement was low was the lack of contact between family and school and suggested that social distance was rooted in the social class or racial differences between parents and teachers.

The third area was school-community relations and school politics, which appeared to be especially impor- tant because certain groups within the community were highly critical of the schools and their actions toward the schools were colored by their hostility. A great deal of conflict and controversy centered around the major structural link between the community and the schools-- the school board.

The small Negro community where the study was con- ducted was within easy commuting distance of Midwest Metropolis. To preserve its anonymity, the pseudonym of Low Water was chosen. Understanding the community is a prerequisite to understanding the research design.

-17-

The community is a "pocket of poverty." A recent study which ranked all the suburbs of Midwest Metropolis in terms of prestige and social status placed Low Water next to the lowest out of 106 communities.

Data for familial support for achievement were gathered from three major sources: interviews with 201 mothers of fourth and sixth graders in the local schools; questionnaires filled out by the children themselves; and school records. In placing these respondents in the larger context of Low Water two dimensions--length of residence and economic well-being--were used. Those who settled in the community before 1960 were referred to as the Oldtimers, the rest as Newcomers. For the "welfare ratio" we followed Morgan (8) in distinguishing the poor from the others as those having a welfare ratio of .9 or less. An additional cutting point of .5 or less was used to separate the truly destitute from the rest of the poor.

To study school-family relations we relied heavily upon informal conversations with teachers and also upon a brief questionnaire which they completed. The questionnaire dealt with the nature and extent of contacts which the teachers had had with the parents of each of their students during the year. Some data from the interviews with the mothers were also useful.

School-community relations and school politics were examined by extensive semi-structured interviews with community actors on both sides of the major school conflict between the Oldtimers and the Reformers. In addition, interviews with the present and past superintendents of schools and with other school personnel provided significant insights. Sixteen persons associated with social service agencies concerned with Low Water were also interviewed. Newspaper articles and school board election documents provided still other sources of data. Finally, a quick follow-up survey of the mothers in the sample was conducted in order to ascertain their voting patterns in school elections.

The first findings were on the social structure of the community. When the two variables--length of residence and welfare ratio--were combined, six statistical categories emerged in describing the social structure of Low Water.

Welfare Ratio

		moderate	low	very low
length of Residence	less than seven years	working class Newcomers (New Workers)	poor New-Comers	destitute New-Comers
	seven years or more	working class Oldtimers (Old Workers)	poor Old-Timers	destitute Old-Timers

This typology largely organizes the significant varia-
tions in social background characteristics which exist in
the community. Families were very large and the number
of children varied inversely with economic welfare. New-
comers tended to have smaller families. Regardless of
length of residence, broken homes were concentrated
among the very poorest residents. Most of the destitute
families were Oldtimers. The destitute Oldtimers were
almost totally rural in background, while the New Workers
were the most urban group. Oldtimers were less likely
to be recent migrants from the South, and recency of migra-
tion was related slightly to economic well-being.

Concerning objective measures of socio-economic
status, two facts stood out. Newcomers were not con-
sistently higher than the Oldtimers on any of the measures
of socio-economic status; thus, being new to the commun-
ity could not automatically be equated with financial well-
being. It was also apparent that the welfare ratio was
closely related to traditional measures of socioeconomic
status.

Two subjective measures of the family's social posi-
tion were also used. Following Centers (2), class iden-
tification was measured. The majority at all levels iden-
tified itself as working class. There was some variation
with the welfare ratio--among the destitute the Newcomers
were more willing to admit belonging to the lower class
and less likely to identify themselves as middle class than
the Oldtimers. On the measure which asked how well they
felt life was going for them, New Workers almost unani-
mously reported that things had been getting better--more
so than among the Oldtimers--while the reverse was true
among the Destitute.

Concerning adaptation to the community as a whole,
satisfaction varied with socio-economic status among New-
comers but not among Oldtimers. New Workers were the

most satisfied, although this could be interpreted as
satisfaction with the housing development rather than
with the community as a whole. New Workers stood
out as the most integrated into the community while
the destitute Newcomers were the least integrated.
Kinship played a part in this, however, for the Oldtimers
were more likely than Newcomers to have relatives in
Low Water. The likelihood of kinship in the community
was high in all parts of the social structure, however.
All three of these variables were systematically related
to economic well-being among the Newcomers, but not
among the Oldtimers. Those Newcomers with adequate
incomes were most satisfied with Low Water and most
closely tied into a neighboring pattern there. On the
other hand, Newcomers who were poor or destitute had
more relatives there but were still lower on satisfaction
and integration into the neighborhood.

The children of the high status Newcomers were the
most likely to show evidence of substantial pre-school
learning, to have parents who had high educational expec-
tations, and to have come from homes with some physical
advantages and within which some achievement-promoting
activities were common. On the other hand, the parents
of these children had relatively weak achievement orienta-
tions and tended to have racial attitudes which were thought
unlikely to promote achievement. Furthermore, the super-
iority of these families in terms of advantages of the phy-
sical environment and intellectually stimulating activities
was far from complete. However, many of the homes of
the most destitute Oldtimers offered considerable support
for achievement, and when asked how much education they
would like their children to have, over 80 percent of all
mothers said they would like to have their children go to
college. The expectation that the collegiate experience
would actually be achieved varied directly with the economic
welfare of the families.

Social and demographic variables were found to be the
most important predictors of achievement. However, these
and other concrete factors declined in importance from the
fourth to the sixth grade, while parental attitudes and values
increased in importance.

The data failed to support any of the links in the causal
chain regarding school-family relations proposed in the
cultural deprivation literature. Social class was found not

to be related to social distance between school and family in the way suggested, and social distance proved to be largely unrelated to contacts. School-initiated contact was found to have a strong negative relationship with achievement, and parent-initiated contact was found to have a very weak relationship in the same direction. Furthermore, the causal direction appeared to be from achievement to contact rather than the reverse.

These findings were reinterpreted in terms of another theoretical framework. This approach emphasized the fact that both the schools and the families are social organizations and that, as such, they have boundaries, internal dynamics, and limited resources which can be applied to the solution of organizational problems. Both systems are at least minimally committed to a common goal, the promotion of high achievement within the younger generation. In addition, both organizations recognize the importance of co-operating to achieve this common end. However, they both also share the feature that contact and communication between parent and teacher may pose a threat to their boundaries and organizational integrity. Given a situation characterized by potential costs and very uncertain rewards, under normal conditions both the school and the family tend to avoid, or at least not to seek, contact. However, when the child's achievement and/or behavior is much poorer than the expectations of the parent or teacher, a conference is called. Usually this contact is initiated by the school, but sometimes the parents seek conferences on their own. The high status Newcomers were found to be much more likely than others to seek such contact and much less likely to have been called in by the teachers to school for a conference.

The school politics of Low Water were found to center around control of the school board. It was concluded that the conflict could be viewed as a struggle between the two major social groups, the Oldtimers and the Reformers, for the prestige, power, and authority associated with membership in the major boundary organization between the families and the schools of the community.

The school politics of Low Water had four distinct historical stages: (1) a period of concensus, stability and rumors of corruption; (2) the reformist take-over; (3) the resurgence of the Oldtimers; and (4) the demoralization of the Reformers. The Reformers saw the Oldtimer-dominated board as a threat to the organizational integrity

of the school system. This threat was alleged to have
resulted from financial wrongdoings and from domination
of the superintendent by the board. On the other hand,
the Oldtimers viewed the Reformers as a potential
threat to the schools, the families, and the school
board itself. The Reformists were though to be spend-
thrifts who squandered money on educational frills
and thereby put a heavy financial burden on the schools
and, ultimately, the individual families within the commun-
ity. The Reformist superintendent had, in their view,
usurped the traditional and legitimate powers of the
board. Finally, some Oldtimers apparently sincerely.
felt that the Reformers were power-hungry Commun-
ists or Communist dupes.

On the whole, the study showed that educational
affairs must be studied in their particular social struc-
tural context. In Low Water, economic status was not
the only important social structural variable. The
differences between the Oldtimers and Newcomers in
terms of their attitudes toward the community and
toward its educational system proved central to under-
standing educational affairs in Low Water. In other
communities, racial, ethnic, generational or reli-
gious cleavages might prove central.

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