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ABSTRACT

Promising research evidence linking achievement, empowerment, and parent participation are dwarfed by troubling indications of negative, infrequent interactions between families and schools. Middle-income parents seem to participate in school-based and home-learning exercises at higher rates than lower-class parents. The study summarized in this report applies Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to understand varying levels of parent participation in schooling. Bourdieu argues that schools draw unevenly on families' social and cultural resources by invoking particular linguistic styles, authority patterns, and types of curricula. Although Lareau's study (1989) extended Bourdieu's research to include parental involvement, it excluded the effects of schools' institutional characteristics on family-school interactions. Multiple-case study research involving three organizationally different schools (public nonchoice, magnet, and Catholic) extends previous findings by examining how school management and organization may mediate the influence of cultural capital on family-school interactions. The discussion suggests the need to underscore the value and importance of school community and to explore ways that school organization promotes or constrains community-building. (34 references) (MLH)

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Building Community: The Influence of School Organization on Patterns of Parent Participation

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ABSTRACT

Recent research (Lareau, 1989) applies the concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977a; 1977b) to identify key elements of class culture that critically affect parent involvement in the educational experiences of their children. Multiple-case study research involving three organizationally different schools (public, magnet, and Catholic) extends these concepts by examining the ways in which school management and organization may mediate the influence of cultural capital on family-school interactions (Smrekar, 1991). The findings indicate that the nature and quality of community within schools is a powerful means of mediating the influence of cultural capital family-school interactions (Smrekar, 1991). The discussion suggests the need to underscore the value and importance of the concept of school community, and to explore ways in which school organization promotes or constrains the development of community.

I. INTRODUCTION

Parent involvement in schooling is widely embraced as an important part of the solution for disparities in educational achievement between low-income children and students from middle-class backgrounds. Originally conceived as a vehicle for political expression and control in social programs, parent involvement programs which emphasize shared governance and decisionmaking attempt to export the aims of democratic participation to the school arena. The principal goal rests with providing access and opportunity for traditionally disenfranchised individuals to express their interests, at least in terms of the schooling their children receive. In addition, these empowerment strategies are designed to give parents the opportunity to demonstrate their support for their children and the school.

While this model of parent involvement is receiving renewed attention, much of the recent parent involvement research and literature focuses primarily on the home environment in an effort to "train" parents in childrearing techniques and home learning activities which are designed to enhance reading and math skills. The inherent contradictions undergirding these two notions of parent involvement--one which locates deficiency in the individual and the other which targets the social institution--has produced a pattern of inconsistent and incomplete arrangements between families and schools. Nevertheless, parent involvement is championed as the policy panacea for many

educational ills, and continues to headline the educational reform agendas of school administrators, teachers, business leaders, legislators, and researchers.

To be sure, there is accumulating evidence regarding the positive effects of both home- and school-based parent involvement programs for parents, teachers, and students. Findings indicate that parent involvement enhances parents' attitudes about themselves, school, school personnel, and the role each plays in the development of the child (Becher, 1986; Gordon, 1979; Keesling and Melaragno, 1983; Rich and Jones, 1977). Teachers also benefit from parental involvement by gaining insights about their students and their home environment (Epstein, 1983). This increased understanding promotes greater cooperation, commitment, and trust between the parents and teacher. Finally, substantial evidence suggests that students' achievement and cognitive development increases when effective parent involvement practices are in place (Comer, 1980; Goodson and Hess, 1975; Henderson, 1981; Rich, 1987; Stearns and Peterson, 1973).

Thus, beyond the powerful idea that as democratic institutions, American public schools should promote sustained parent participation in the decisions which impact the lives of children and their families, the research indicates that tight connections between families and schools positively influence the process and practice of schooling.

These promising reports regarding linkages among achievement, empowerment, and parent participation, however, are dwarfed by troubling indications of negative and infrequent interactions between families and schools. The lack of involvement is not random with respect to social class. Teachers and administrators suggest that middle-income parents participate at higher rates than lower-class parents, both in terms of school-based activities and home-learning exercise. These observations are routinely provided as evidence that low-income parents "just don't care about their kids" or "don't think education is important." Moreover, researchers (Baker and Stevenson, 1986; Medrich et al, 1982; Stevenson and Baker, 1988; Wilcox, 1978) have identified educative enrichment activities (reading to children, taking children to the library, attending school events) which middle-class parents apparently engage in more frequently than lower-class parents. Despite these observations, the critical question of how and why social class affects patterns of parent action in schools is overlooked--muted by more vocal voices promoting the virtues of parent involvement and strategies for increasing it (e.g., Clark, 1983; Coleman, 1987; Henderson, et al., 1986; Rich, 1985; Swap, 1984). The result is a predictable stream of recycled reform rhetoric championing parent involvement, widespread disappointment about the lack of it, and professed faith in getting it--through parent workshops and school site committees.

II. CULTURAL CAPITAL AND FAMILY-SCHOOL INTERACTIONS

This study applies Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to understand varying levels of parent participation in schooling. Bourdieu argues that schools draw unevenly on the social and cultural resources of members of the society by invoking particular linguistic styles, authority patterns, and types of curricula (Bourdieu, 1977a, 1977b; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Children from higher social classes enter school familiar with these social arrangements. The cultural properties acquired from home differentially facilitate students' adjustment to school, thereby transforming cultural resources into what Bourdieu calls cultural capital (Lareau, 1989).

This perspective provides the necessary theoretical framework to examine cultural patterns associated with social class and to analyze how these patterns provide advantages in social institutions. By exploring the inter-institutional linkages among schooling, family life, and individuals, cultural capital furnishes the theoretical lenses necessary to understand why social class influences family-school relations.

Although Bourdieu does not examine the question of parent involvement in schooling, his analyses contribute to the research on the importance of class and culture in parents' interactions with schools (see Baker and Stevenson, 1986; Connell et al, 1982; Ogbu, 1974; McPherson, 1972; Wilcox, 1978). More recent research, however, applies the concept of cultural capital to studies of parent involvement to understand how social class

provides parents with unequal resources and dispositions in the educational experiences of their children (Lareau, 1989). Lareau asserts that higher social class provides parents with more resources to intervene in schooling and to bind families into tighter connections with social institutions than are available to working-class families. These resources are derived from their education, income and material resources, occupational status, style of work, and social networks. Specifically, the Lareau study suggests that: 1) more years of schooling provide parents with a greater capacity to understand the instructional language used by teachers, and more generally, the competence to help their children with schoolwork; 2) higher social status allows parents to approach teachers as social equals or superiors, and provides a sense of confidence in the educational setting; 3) higher incomes make it easier for parents to purchase more educational resources, and to obtain child care services and transportation to attend school events; 4) upper-middle class jobs more closely resemble the interconnection between work and home that teachers envision for students and their schoolwork; and 5) upper-middle class parents are more likely to be members of social networks which provide information on school processes and practices. The idea that once parents are taught the importance of being involved in their children's education, all have an equal chance to participate in the ways teachers want, is simply misguided and false, according to Lareau.

Although the Lareau study provides powerful evidence for the importance of considering the influence of social class and culture on family-school interactions, it deliberately excludes the effects of institutional characteristics of schools on these relations. Consequently, little is known how the effects of school organization may alter or mediate the influence of social class or cultural capital on family-school interactions. At the same time, researchers have examined the effect of certain organizational factors on family-school relations, (e.g., the effect of teacher practices and attitudes: Becker and Epstein, 1982; Epstein and Becker, 1982; Epstein, 1983); the effect of school charter: Baker, Oswald, and Stevenson, 1988; Stevenson and Baker, 1988; the effect of affirmative choice: Erickson, 1982; Metz, 1986; and the effect of functional community: Coleman and Hoffer, 1987; but have excluded the concept of cultural capital from their analyses.

The findings from this study explore the interaction between cultural capital and institutional characteristics of schooling. The research blends an organizational study with issues of social stratification by examining the nature and quality of family-school interactions across social class¹ in three organizationally different school settings. Analysis and discussion focus on the ways in which school management and organization may alter or mediate the influence of social class or cultural capital on family-school interactions.²

III. METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

A Catholic school and a magnet school were selected to examine the influence of choice across public and non-public sectors. A public, neighborhood school (non-choice school) served as the comparative model against which to contrast the conditions of the choice schools.³

The three schools selected satisfy the conditions necessary to examine different school community compositions and the degree to which these elements mediate the influence of cultural capital on family-school interactions (Lareau, 1989).

In order to examine the ways in which cultural capital influences family-school interactions, schools were selected which are comprised of families from different social class backgrounds, or in other words, who differ in the amount of cultural capital they possess. Each of the three schools selected for the study includes students whose families vary across a continuum of social class backgrounds, from upper-middle class to low-income.

The data collection strategy for this study involved a series of in-depth interviews with 10-12 sets of selected parents⁴ from three elementary schools located within a large metropolitan area in Northern California. Four teachers and the principal were interviewed from each of the three schools. School secretaries, parent-school liaisons, and PTA officers were also interviewed. In addition to interviews, formal and informal interactions between parents and school officials were observed

over the course of the 15-month study. These observations included: back-to-school night, parent-teacher conferences, PTA and School Advisory Committee (SAC)/School Site Council (SSC) meetings, and holiday pageants. Letters, newsletters, handbooks, budget reports, meeting minutes, and other school documents were analyzed.

The parents selected for these case studies were drawn randomly from a sample of white families in socio-economic categories which range from upper-middle class to low-income (defined as qualifying for AFDC). School records and parent data cards provided information indicating parents' income and occupation. Interviews were arranged at the convenience of the participants and audiotaped with their permission. The interviews with parents were conducted in their homes, with a few exceptions⁵; school staff members were interviewed on campus. Some teachers were interviewed individually, others were interviewed in groups of two. The sessions lasted an average of 2 hours.

The three elementary schools selected represent organizationally different school settings in terms of choice, type of school community (value, geographical, religious/philosophical), and programmatic commitment. The three schools are located within the same Northern California county and are similar in the socio-economic status of their student/family populations. Additionally, while the three types of schools (Catholic, magnet, neighborhood) selected for the

study vary across the critical dimensions of school organization identified by the study's conceptual design, the particular schools within each type were selected because of their similarities across other organizational characteristics, including average faculty tenure, principal tenure, and degree of familiarity and cohesion among faculty members.

IV. FINDINGS: FAMILY LIFE, SCHOOL ORGANIZATION, AND COMMUNITY

A. Families and Communities

1. Portrait of Family Life

Across schools and social class, the parents interviewed for this study revealed a high degree of stress and exhaustion. As they considered the demands of balancing work and family lives, these parents described a frenetically paced lifestyle which allows little time for discretionary or spontaneous activities.

For dual income, middle-class families, the layered responsibilities of parenting and employment turn typical evenings and weekends into tightly ordered time grids, with children's soccer practices, work meetings, and meals somehow squeezed into particular temporal slots. Cleaning up the kitchen after dinner, organizing bath times, returning phone calls, even reading the newspaper, seem to require immense amounts of effort and energy.

Although the degree of stress is shared by low-income parents who are not employed, the sources are strikingly

different. The environmental factors associated with poverty-- poor health, emotional distress, violent or abusive family members, lack of child care--create patterns of coping and survival which often leave little energy or optimism.

Family structure parallels and often compounds the stressors associated with socio-economic status. Single parents identified particular constraints and challenges embedded in this social structure which imposes the overwhelming responsibilities of parenting on a single individual. Regardless of whether or not they are employed and have access to additional resources, these parents' voices reverberated with images of loneliness, fear, and despair.

The ways in which families spend their time together reflects the fragmentation which arises from multiple obligations, conflicting schedules, and endless chores. For many families in the study (excluding low-income families), organized family interactions center around sports or religious activities. Church-related obligations and functions tend to tightly organize the social activities of families who are members of a Christian fundamentalist church, or one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Likewise, parents whose children are actively involved in school or league sports programs such as soccer or Little League find their leisure time bracketed around practices and games.

2. Social Networks

The ways in which family lives are organized has implications for the kinds of social networks--social contact and the exchange of information--parents establish. As a consequence of some parents' patterns of social interactions, for example, they may tend to connect themselves socially and physically to other church members, or perhaps, families who are similarly active in organized sports.⁶ Some families in this study, typically those who are upper-middle class, identified their neighborhoods as physical parameters for social networks with other adults and their families. But a more common linkage expressed repeatedly was that of a kinship network. In the absence of social ties rooted in organizations, within- and extended family interactions predominated the descriptions of social networks and adult socializing for parents across social class and school setting. To a large degree, this pervasive sense of insularity is driven by the exigencies of work and family lives. Nevertheless, one social institution--school--emerged in two case studies as a means of unifying disparate sets of parents within the parameters of space and time in a school community of shared interests and sustained interactions.

3. Organization of School Communities

The degree to which parents' social networks include accessible channels to the parents whose children attend the same school is impacted in critical and fundamental ways by certain school organizational processes and structures. Collectively,

the studies of a Catholic elementary school, a magnet elementary school, and neighborhood elementary school suggest mechanisms which tend to either promote or constrain social contacts and information exchanges across geographically and socio-economically differentiated families. In doing so, these studies highlight the influence of social networks on parental involvement in schooling outlined by Lareau (1989). While affirming the significance of social networks as a mechanism for the exchange of information, advice, opinion, and rumor regarding schooling, these portraits of school community capture the ways in which school-based social networks mediate the effects of class-based social ties. Thus, in building upon the conceptual models which undergird this study, central and fundamental questions are addressed: How does community (and its attendant elements--social networks) alter the effects of social class on the nature and quality of family-school relations? How do school organizational and management processes promote or constrain the development of school community?

In each of the three schools, parents consistently characterized other school parents as "a real mix." There were repeated remarks and observations from parents regarding differences in socio-economic status, philosophical/religious beliefs, family structures, and ethnicity among families in each of the three schools. Amidst these cleavages, however, parents from the Catholic school and the magnet school invoked a far different language to suggest overarching commonalities which

transcend individual differences. In sharp and striking contrast to the parents whose children attend the public neighborhood school, magnet and Catholic school parents identified processes which create a widespread sense of social cohesion and community across a collection of differentiated members. What are these organizational processes? The following represents a comparative analysis of two school communities: the most cohesive and well-endowed (magnet school), and the most insular and elusive (public neighborhood school).

Carlton Elementary School (Magnet)

Carlton School parents perceive themselves as members of a separate, elite public school community. Although drawn from widely scattered neighborhoods,⁷ the sense of community at Carlton is palpable and pervasive. In the absence of natural familiarity and occasions for face-to-face talk which may be evidenced in geographical communities, Carlton School reflects a constructed community undergirded by a sense of shared values, solidarity, and commitment.

Three integrated elements of the school's organization account for the processes which construct the social network and value community⁸ at Carlton: required parent participation; communication; and choice.

Required Parent Participation

Both substantively and symbolically, a 40-hour participation requirement (per school year) binds parents in a sense of solidarity and "family." Parents have a clear incentive

to attend school-based events such as fundraisers, meetings, and social get-togethers, or to work part-time in the classroom, computer lab or library--they earn hours. Thus, while parents may live in different neighborhoods, work in various occupations, and share few social networks, the physical arrangement of time and space constructs the opportunity for face-to-face talk. As the occasions accumulate over time, a sense of familiarity and comfort is established, contributing to a sense of connection. The notions of congruence and compatibility were echoed repeatedly by parents:

Is there a sense of community at Carlton?

There pretty much is a strong sense of community, partly because we're required to go and work for the school and it grows and the feeling of commitment to your children, to the school. I think that we all feel like we're part of one family. (mother, lower-middle class)

I like, when you go into that school everybody knows . . . all the teachers know all the students. They know most all the parents. They know everybody by name. You can wander into the office and she can go call your child for you without asking, 'Now, who's your kid?

What room is he in?' They all know each other.
They all care. (mother, lower-middle class)

People stay here year after year after year
after year and we do know the families and the
parents and it seems that we've compensated for
(the feeder system). I don't know how, to tell
you the truth. It has a good feeling. It has
a great feeling. (teacher)

How do you get to know other parents?

Meetings, sporting events, scouts. I've worked
in the class. At some point you either meet
them at the school, and then you meet them at a
sporting event. Then your children make
friends and you meet the parents. It just kind
of evolves. I worked in the classrooms and the
office a few times. I feel like I know quite a
few of them. (mother, middle class)

While the participation requirement is instrumental in
providing a mechanism to establish social networks among parents
and between parents and school staff, it also marks parents as
members of a particular group or **Gemeinschaft** community (Tonnie,
1963). That is, rather than being tied together by legal or
formal means such as by law or contract (**Gesellschaft**
communities), Carlton parents are bound by a perception of shared
interests and mutual goals embodied in the act of public choice.

Just as a willingness to pay for education seems to purchase a sense of mutual commitment and membership for Catholic school parents, the promise to fulfill the participation requirement specified in a written contract is the badge that provides Carlton parents with a manifest sense of belonging to this value community. The fulfillment of the contract acts as a kind of standard which ensures a collection of homogeneous and compatible members who have "bought into the program."

Communication

Carlton School has established a vast network of communication channels which solidifies the organization of a value community by connecting individuals to a collective of parents who perceive themselves to be like-minded. The communication system, for example, draws on a ready pool of parent volunteers eager to satisfy their 40-hour requirement through their participation in a phone network system which alerts parents in each grade regarding specific classroom events and responsibilities. Additionally, a punitive system ensures that parents and students coordinate their efforts in receiving and returning notices. Parents are kept abreast of their children's academic performance through what are called "weekly reports." Each Friday, teachers send home a comprehensive summary of the student's performance on homework, quizzes, class assignments, and tests. Thus, the school's organization and policies reinforce and parallel one another: parents are kept well-informed, perceive that their interests and concerns are

being taken into account, identify themselves as a member of the school community, and maintain an active level of involvement in school activities. Several perspectives help illuminate this point:

Oh, they're real good at communication. They send home papers. So they're really good. And things that are really important, they have you sign and you have to take back. It's really a responsibility between you and your child to make sure that it comes back because if it doesn't, they get points, or minutes, where they have to stay in from recess. (mother, lower-middle class)

It just seems like sometimes people throw their kids at school to babysit. Or parents don't find out what's going on until Open House. Whereas at Carlton, we know what's going on all the time. We don't have to wait for an Open House. (father, middle class)

They keep you involved and they keep you aware of what's going on over there. The teacher-parent communication is really good. The teacher's always letting me know where

they're at, what's going on, where they need help. (mother, middle class)

Faculty of Collective Interests

The basic school program at Carlton and the corresponding culture of community reflect the faculty's unity of purpose and social cohesion. The common practices and collective beliefs Carlton teachers share are translated to parents and students in a common language and set of consistent actions. Teachers are the agents, the messengers, and the enforcers of the organizational processes which create community and social networks at Carlton. Their individual biographies, visceral styles, and varied interpretations seem to collapse around a shared vision of what schools ought to offer children and their families:

All of us have our different kind of interpretations. But as far as a whole, we're very committed to the goal of a basic school. So that gives us a lot of collegiality so that all of us focus on what we want to be about. We may be a little different in our getting there, but we're all kind of focused about being there. And because we all kind of agree on that, we're all willing to help each other. So it's really a very high level of collegiality. In our lunch room, we talk about how we handle different things. We ask

people's advice. There's not a stigma in me going to another teacher and asking her to help me out. So we just all work together. And I think that kind of teamwork is really different than at some of the other less successful schools. (3rd grade teacher)

I would say we probably have the best program in the city because these children here are going to get an education. And the other thing you're going to find here is with these children, they come first and we come second. Their needs come first and ours come second. You don't see a lot of teachers going home early. They're here a long time and spend a lot of time. (5th grade teacher)

We sell this to our parents because we're sold on it. Everybody is sold on it. No just me. Not just the intermediate side, but the whole school is. (3rd grade teacher)

The heightened sense of commitment and success has engendered a vocal and exuberant claim of ownership:

Whom does this school belong to?

The teachers and the children and the parents.
It belongs to us. It's ours. You should ask

the teachers around here. When you talk to the rest of us who have been here a long time, just don't . . . just be careful because we feel . . . we're the first to tell you when things are wrong but we're the first to tell you things are right. This is like family to us. (4th grade teacher)

The incentive is real and powerful: the intrinsic rewards associated with successful classroom experiences and supportive parents require a collective of like-minded parents and their children. The challenge of "selling the program" involves communicating this imperative.

Community: Common, Separate, and Apart

Do you think most of the other Carlton parents are people like yourselves?

I think so. I think what it comes down to is because of the participation hours. It takes a certain basic responsibility to have your child there. So it draws the same . . . so I think part of the reason that the parents are basically the same values or the same type of people is the participation hours and the different criteria that has to be met to have your child at that school. (mother, lower-middle class)

I could go talk to any of the parents and feel a common tie, even though I don't know them. It isn't that I have to know them or anything. It's just the school and the requirements and the standards. (mother, middle class)

When parents were asked if they are like other parents at Carlton, many described the population as "mixed" or "balanced" across socio-economic backgrounds. Most parents suggested that school families tend to be middle class people and described this category as "young couples, working, homeowners." In addition, they said there is a sizeable number of "needy" families at Carlton. This general awareness (and accurate assessment) of the mix of families prompted many parents to comment on their perception of commonalities across Carlton families, despite particular differences in social class or religion. These parents seem to underscore the influence of particular organizational elements on processes which contribute to a sense of social cohesion and community:

Everybody seems to trust one another. Your kids go to this school. You come from a good family. And I think it's true. I don't have a problem sending my children to any of their friends' home. No matter where. Even if . . . there are some kids who are living in that housing development on the corner. I don't even have a problem with that because I

trust the family. The families who are sending their kids to Carlton, you know that their beliefs are like your own. (mother, upper-middle class)

Because you have families who have chosen to go to this school, you sort of set-up that you have a lot in common before you ever meet. People with strong values in family and education, willing to go the extra mile. So that's different . . . We usually feel that most of the time we have a lot of shared values, even though we may come from different parts of the city or different churches or whatever. We know that there's a foundation that we have common goals for our children. (mother, lower-middle class)

Do you feel like the other families at Carlton are people like yourselves?

Yea, they care about their kids. I don't know about the Christian part of it. Like my friend, she's Mormon. So we're different. There's different beliefs there. But as far as the moral part of it, the family part of it, I

feel that a lot of the Carlton people really do care or they wouldn't be there because you have to put in time. And you have to do it. And I like that. So I feel like we all have a common . . . We all want the best for our kids.
(mother, lower-middle class)

Yes, I would say so except that I would guess that economically we are probably upper-class for Carlton . . . I know a lot of the families--the kids have friends--don't have as nice a house, and that type of stuff. As far as value system, they're interested in their kids. They love their kids and they want them to do well. (mother, upper-middle class)

The perception of common goals and values born out of the formal acceptance of a set of particular organizational standards and expectations contributes to a parallel impression of Carlton parents' separateness from other public school parents and students. That is, the social cohesion experienced by these parents united around a set of articulated aims and expectations has certain consequences; they begin to think of themselves as part of a collective of like-minded individuals, separate and apart from other public school parents. To be sure, there is an objective basis to the elitism: the school's option of forced exit⁹--remanding parents and their children back to their

neighborhood schools if they fail to comply with the Carlton School contract.¹⁰ The ability and willingness to comply with particular organizational rules is the yardstick by which Carlton parents measure the suitability of other prospective parents and children. Indeed, these standards not only set the conditions for continuation in the school, they help enact the sense of community and social cohesion.

Choice and Self Selection

The degree to which Carlton parents represent a self-selected group of parents is difficult to assess definitively, but several clues suggest that they possess few of the characteristics of such self-selected groups as Catholic school parents. There is no tuition exacted at Carlton, no special fees. The lottery admissions policy demands only a mailed application. Transportation is free, easy, and direct; school buses pick-up children at their neighborhood school and deposit them at Carlton.

The evidence from this case study suggests that serendipity and socialization, rather than self-selection, account for the sense of commonality and community at Carlton. The serendipitous nature of school choice is represented in the ways in which parents at Carlton School selected it for their children. Rather than pursuing a systematic review of school alternatives, the context of decisionmaking reveals that a chance conversation or unsolicited advice prompted a look-and-see attitude for many parents discouraged by their unsafe or

depressing neighborhood school. Most moved into their current homes and neighborhoods with little knowledge, only expectations, of their neighborhood school. Then a friend, neighbor, or babysitter mentioned something about Carlton. Or perhaps a kindergarten teacher's remark or suggestion convinced a parent to make an initial phone call. For most parents, Carlton represents a good alternative to a mediocre, or unsafe, neighborhood school. Their interests in a basic education, safety, and discipline seem far more typical than extraordinary. Their unfamiliarity with the basic school philosophy or the aims of the magnet program suggest that these parents do not resemble the typical characteristics of self-selected parents who opt for alternatives to their neighborhood public schools. It is clear that rather than matching parents' particular expectations for a school, Carlton helps define and develop them.

Consequences for Patterns of Parent Participation

The sense of familiarity and social cohesion have direct and immediate implications for patterns of parent participation at Carlton School. Knowing "lots of parents" provides particular benefits to all parents who are members of this community. These relationships are neither tenuous nor temporary; rather, they are stable and predictable sources of information and referral. Reputations of particular teachers, the types of homework he/she assigns, deadlines for applications to the magnet middle school, reputations of high schools--access to this kind of "insider" information provides an invaluable tool for parents who are

engaged in their children's academic experiences. The social networks established easily and naturally through Carlton's array of school activities provide the channels for shared information, rumor, and speculation.

Social networks with Carlton parents who possess particular knowledge about schooling may help parents whose social class position does not provide similar resources and who, for example, may be unfamiliar with the language of competency testing and curriculum, or in the subtleties of high school admissions strategies. Thus, these school-based networks may mediate the influence of at least some of the elements of social class (e.g., education, social networks) which recent research indicates critically influence the ways parents interact with schools (Lareau, 1989).

For example, when Carlton parents were asked if they had requested particular teachers at Carlton, most of the parents responded positively. All relied upon other Carlton parents for their information. It is interesting to recall the rather casual, serendipitous nature of these parents' decision to choose Carlton, and to contrast those circumstances with these parents' distinctively more active and aware level of decisionmaking as Carlton parents. One parent (middle class) said it was easy to get information about teachers' reputations because, "you develop such a community." Another parent (low-income) suggested that Carlton parents "are always trading information," and noted that it was from a Carlton parent that she learned about the GATE

program for her daughter. Another parent who works full-time said, "You get to know a teachers' reputation through Carlton activities, talking to parents who have kids in different classes." Many parents suggested that the information was considered accurate because much of it was offered by parents who volunteer in the classroom, or work to fulfill their 40 hours in some capacity at the school site.

The impact of an enhanced level of communication between home and school at Carlton is reflected in the rich, detailed knowledge of school policies and activities parents possess. As a result of the fluid, consistent dialogue between parents and teachers, there are few surprises regarding students' performance. Established, customary rituals like parent-teacher conferences barely resemble the uncomfortable and forced occasions of face-to-face interactions that most school teachers and parents dread. The widened zone of comfort and familiarity across parents and teachers allows these events to become something like a friendly conversation about mutual interests and concerns.

Western School (Neighborhood)

The nature and quality of community at Western School suggests a critical absence of social cohesion and communication. While there is evidence of interaction and mutual dependence within a geographically isolated and socially differentiated sub-group of school parents (low-income apartment residents), it is undergirded by corresponding elements of instability and

uncertainty. Despite the school's programmatic commitment to parental participation--the vast array of volunteer opportunities, special events and programs, and traditional school organizations designed to enhance a sense of connection to the school, Western School parents reflect alternating patterns of insularity and distraction.¹¹

Commitment to Parent Program

Western School invites participation from parents through a wide array of volunteer opportunities, special events and programs, and traditional school organizations. There are special workshops on parenting skills, helping children with their homework, and promoting children's self-esteem. Some workshops target specific sub-groups, such as single parents and grandparents, who may be facing particular challenges and concerns in raising their grand/children. Some of these events are one-time only affairs, while others are arranged on a weekly, year-long basis. Western also features "Parent Education Day," in which parents are invited to sit in on classroom lessons, review a lesson plan, and examine curricular materials with the principal. There is a "Grandparents Day," a "Bring a Parent/Grandparent to Lunch Day," as well as the monthly Pride Assembly. These assemblies include a 15-minute "Principal's Chat" in which parents are invited to sit with the principal and enjoy coffee and cookies while engaging in a discussion on a particular topic selected by the principal. Finally, the PTA and the School Advisory Committee/School Site Council offer parents

the opportunity to make decisions regarding school fundraising and discretionary spending.

Western's interest and commitment to promoting a spirit of school volunteerism is evidenced by repeated announcements and notes of appreciation in the Weekly Bulletin. The Parent Handbook/school calendar includes a special page devoted to a description of the volunteer opportunities. Also, a small framed card which hangs prominently in the front office bulletin board reminds parents and visitors that: Volunteers are a real asset on the Western campus . . . Your help can make the difference!! The efforts seem to have paid off; Western has won the district award for volunteerism three years in a row.

The principal is the enthusiastic promoter behind the volunteer and parent participation programs at Western. In her message to parents on page 1 of the Parent Handbook, she focuses on parent involvement and the Pride Assembly--the forum designed to celebrate students' and parents' contributions to the school. She reminds parents that, "Parental involvement in a child's education is one of the major factors of how well a child does in school." Throughout the months of the school calendar, the box for Saturday lists parenting tips like, "Take your child to the public library;" "Listen to your child;" and "Remember--Parents are their child's first teacher!!" When asked whether or not there were enough opportunities for parents and school staff to interact, she outlined her thoughts:

There aren't enough. You know, parents are tired after they work all day. They don't want to come in the evening. It's difficult to get off work. If they're not working, if they're on welfare, they're a little bit intimidated by coming to school to meet with the principal. You know, that's real scary to them . . . It's like pulling teeth to get parents into schools. And all those things are factors, the main one being if they're working, it's tough in a day and when you get home you have to fix dinner, gotta get your kids ready for bed, and then you've gotta go down to the school at 7:00. It's sort of like, I'm going to go and when the time comes you don't go.

In order to "get" the parents, her strategy involves attaching a student performance to as many parent events as possible. The principal observes:

They'll come to see their children--which again goes back to how much they care about their kids. So, if you can get them while they're here, you know, that's the thing to do and so if you have any kind of parent night, you always want kids performing or something to do with the kids.

How have parents responded to these opportunities?

According to observations, teacher and principal reports, and parents' own accounts, despite the efforts of the school staff, only a small fraction of Western parents attend workshops, PTA or SAC/SSC meetings, or Open House. The principal estimated that about 15 parents attended the school's "Reading Night;" a handful participated in the weekly parenting class. The teachers interviewed reported that fewer than 50% of their parents typically attend the annual back-to-school night, although the numbers are often higher in the kindergarten and first grade classes. Several of the most active "parents," including the Parent Coordinator and PTA president, are parents of former Western students, long since graduated.

Fundamental characteristics associated with the nature and quality of community at Western undergird the tenuous connections linking parents to one another and to the school. To be sure, the school shares few of the constitutive elements of community: interaction and mutual dependence; the intention of longevity and permanence; expressive ties; communication; common and mutual sentiments; and shared beliefs (Raywid, 1988). If a portrait of community is composed of a sense of commitment, solidarity, and mutual support, Western reflects only a sketchy outline. Instead, a sense of diversity and division--geographical and social--are expressed in the reverberating language of parents and teachers.

Within the neighborhood of middle class homes, there is a sense that people know their neighbors as well as they want to know them. Individual efforts are reciprocated among neighbors. But there is also a corresponding sense of insularity driven by the exigencies of work and family lives. If school parents know one another, their familiarity arises out of their children's friendships with other school children, or through the community soccer league, or perhaps Camp Fire Girls. But these occasions for face-to-face talk are typically brief, unpredictable, and unrelated. Thus, the broad brush generalizations about a "mixed" population of school parents prompts a parent's admission that she "really doesn't know them." Parents' social networks are tied to their church, their family, or perhaps, their work associates. Consider these perspectives:

Do you know many Western parents?

Not really, outside of the parents of the girls my daughter plays with. I really don't know any others. (mother, middle class)

Just the parents of the kids that my boys are friends with--the people I talk to. I talk to the mothers and some of the fathers of my son's friends but that's about it. (father, middle class)

You know, I have to say no because of the fact I am (a member of a particular church) so I do a lot with families there. (mother, middle class)

This parent, who lives in the more comfortable and expensive apartments near the school, suggests the parent-parent familiarity is tightly bracketed around limited conversation across the complex:

I know some of the mothers because when my daughter was in the first grade I led a Blue Bird group. So I met a few mothers. And there are several I know that live in this complex that the girls spend the night over their house. So I've gotten to know like that, which is nice.

Do you think most of the families are people like yourselves?

Yea, maybe. I guess. I don't really know them personally enough. I know them enough to talk to them and have a small conversation but we don't go places with them. I don't know what they do with their time. (mother, lower-middle class)

Another parent, who is middle class and one of the few Western parents in a professional occupation, observed that there is a core of Western parents who attend the fundraisers,

back-to-school night, and meetings regularly and, consequently, know one another quite well:

You're seeing the same parents all the time. So there are those who are highly involved and those who are rarely involved. And there doesn't seem to be a middle ground. (father, middle class)

The Consequences for Patterns of Parent Participation

To an immeasurable degree, Western parents' source of knowledge regarding schooling reflects their patterns of social networks. For low-income parents who live nearby in the close-quartered, problem-plagued apartments, a sense of mutual dependence and shared misfortune binds parents in a network of rumor, speculation, and information. These neighbors tend to know much more about one another because their living space is far more compressed and communal; families share walls, balconies, and telephones. The substance and tenor of a heated argument penetrate family dwellings easily under such conditions. As one parent responded when asked if she knows her neighbors: "It's kind of hard not to know them. They make themselves known." Many of these parents said they try to mind their own business, stay in their own apartment, and keep out of trouble. But the constancy and frequency of assorted crises--trips to the hospital emergency room, the use of a neighbor's telephone when their service is disconnected, the unforeseen need for a babysitter at midnight--account for regular, accumulated

incidences of extended face-to-face exchanges. Their social networks are limited to other low-income parents because few are employed, attend a church, or are members of the PTA; their children are not members of a soccer team or scouting troop. To the degree that they are familiar with particular teachers' reputations, understand the language of learning disability classifications, or recognize the implications of a deficiency notice--it is likely that the pieces of information or understanding are derived from their own educational experiences and collected from other parents--perhaps supplemented by interactions with their children's teachers.

The nature of parents' knowledge regarding schooling suggests that in the absence of organizational structures and processes which draw deeply and regularly from among the diverse population of Western parents, parents' familiarity with school programs and processes are lifted from the written communications sent from school. Parents are well informed regarding the time and date of school assemblies, PTA meetings, ice cream social fundraisers, and parenting classes for single parents. The regular Wednesday newsletters contain pertinent information for parents regarding Early Bird/Late Bird reading group schedules and California Achievement Program (CAP) testing.

More fine-grained information, however, regarding such things as teachers' reputations and parents' rights under the special education program are the stuff of "insider information," or parents' networks. The degree to which school-based networks

help inform those parents whose social class position does not provide resources (education, social network ties) regarding these issues and strategies, these networks overcome some of the critical elements of social class which critically influences the ways parents interact with schools (Lareau, 1989).

As noted earlier, the patterns of social networks at Western indicate that interactions among parents are bracketed around social class and geographical boundaries. While some middle class parents report occasional exchanges with other middle class Western parents, most suggest rather insular patterns of interactions within families. Low-income apartment residents, in contrast, reflect an interwoven network of interdependence and information. In the absence of mechanisms which promote sustained social interactions across the population of families at Western, these patterns are fixed and self-sustaining.

Parents' knowledge of teachers' reputations provides an illuminating example of these information flows. Most of the parents interviewed knew the names of their children's teachers, were informed regarding the Pride Assemblies, and understood the concept of the "early birds" and "late birds" ability grouping for reading instruction. When asked whether or not they had ever requested a particular teacher for their children, only 3 of the 12 parents said they had. Among these three sets of parents, one said they based their request on their children's suggestions; another parent said she knew who the better teachers were from

her classroom volunteer experiences at Western. Only one parent observed that his family's information came from neighborhood parents whose children are a little older. A parent who is low-income and was well-informed regarding Wednesday newsletters, reading groups, and assemblies, said she didn't realize she could request a teacher. The rest of the parents indicated that any knowledge of teachers' reputations was limited to their first-hand experience with their children's teachers.

V. CONCLUSIONS

These findings underscore the importance of examining school organizational and management processes which promote or constrain the development of school-based social networks, and which contribute to broad education policies designed to connect families and schools.

A. Building Community Among Parents

The importance of building community and social networks is demonstrated by the case studies of Carlton and Western schools. A sense of familiarity and social cohesion creates stable and predictable relationships which provide sources of information and referral. Reputations of particular teachers, requirements for special enrichment programs, deadlines for applications to magnet middle schools, and reputations of high schools--access to this kind of information provides an invaluable tool for parents to maximize their children's educational and academic success. Social networks with parents who possess particular knowledge about schooling may help parents

whose social class position does not provide similar resources from which to draw this kind of information. Thus, school-based social networks may mediate the influence of at least some of the elements of social class which research indicates critically influence the ways in which parents interact with schools (Lareau, 1989).

The following discussion extends this analysis by addressing the challenging and potentially troubling aspects of these organizational arrangements and management strategies for families and schools.

1. School Contract

The Carlton school contract embodies what many parents consider the elements of good parenting and "common sense stuff"--the promise to maintain an active, supportive, and encouraging role in their children's education. For some observers, however, the imposition of a contract implies an asymmetry of power, knowledge, and control--elements appropriated by school officials. They may find a contract anathema to the sense of mutual respect, shared commitment, and sustained cooperation which it is intended to foster. The imposition of a single set of socio-cultural norms, and the failure to recognize the rich diversity within and across families of varied social and cultural backgrounds, may also be a concern.

An alternative approach might involve parents more substantively in developing ideas for their participation in schooling. For example, parents might be asked to develop a

"vision statement" of their educational goals for their children. The statement would establish a set of guidelines for achieving these goals--ideas which would involve meaningful and sustained interactions between the family and the school. This document would reflect parents' expectations, desires, and self-imposed obligations. The process involved in asking parents what they want for their children, and in what ways they can contribute to these goals, may work to nurture and sustain meaningful relations between them and school officials.

In the absence of choice arrangements, this modified agreement process seems more appropriate and meaningful, particularly since regular public, neighborhood schools lack enforcement capacity (i.e., forced exit). Under a choice arrangement similar to Carlton's magnet program, however, the contract reflects the parallel convictions and intentions of parents and school officials to impose a certain boundary of expectations around participants. Since parents have voluntarily selected this school, there is little sense of institutional control or power play. Nevertheless, the choice mechanism itself may contribute to large-scale inequities which are ultimately more troubling than any contract arrangement.

2. Organized Activities

Parents whose work lives make it difficult to attend school events or to simply volunteer occasionally in their children's classrooms (i.e., those who do not have flexible work arrangements or who work full-time) are objectively disadvantaged

under a required participation scheme; they may not have access to particular knowledge or to the school-based social networks that these activities promote. The Carlton case study indicates that the wide variety of activities parents can fulfill at home (e.g., correcting homework, making signs and buttons, baking cookies) seems to level the effects of social class and employment patterns on parents' abilities to participate in sanctioned "school activities." That is, since "inventoried items" credited under the Carlton school contract are generously varied, working parents are not necessarily disadvantaged in their effort to "fulfill hours." Nevertheless, the interest rests with building a value community around activities which encourage opportunities for face-to-face interaction among disparate sets of parents. While a school sports program, a season-long academic olympiads, or musical/dramatic programs may provide options for parents, the aim of community involves a fundamental rethinking of the way schools and work are organized.

3. Organization of Work

These case studies suggest that the organization of work lives, to a larger degree than salary or occupational status, influences parents' level of participation at school-based events. Observed differences in income and material resources (within a certain band of social class--upper-middle class to lower-middle class) are dwarfed by the overarching and pervasive similarities found in the organization of family life in response to both parents working outside the home.

These findings prompt a need to reconsider the organization of work which limits the flexibility of employees to engage in school-based activities which convene during school hours. While schools tend to structure school-based activities for traditional, stay-at-home mothers, a large number of households consist of parents who are employed in full-time occupations which provide little opportunity to leave their place of employment during work hours. As schools begin to rethink the organization of their activities, employers may reconsider the organization of work lives which militate against the kind of commitment to educational excellence that organized business groups are demanding in the current debate on the quality of our nation's schools.

B. The Paradox of Choice

These case studies suggest that choice is a powerful engine for creating the constituent elements of community. These elements seem to coalesce when choice mechanisms organize individuals who view themselves as separate from non-choice individuals, or in the works of one, as "a better class of parents." Badges of community typically reflect standards which must be overcome to prove oneself worthy of inclusion into the community. Community members have an obvious and vested interest in working to maintain a community of conformity to ensure a collection of like-minded families. Nevertheless, these issues raise serious and troubling questions which are typically not addressed in the research and rhetoric on school choice. Do the

organizational arrangements which promote social cohesion and social networks militate against certain elements of diversity? Can schools promote value communities and social networks in the absence of choice? These issues associated with the confluence of school management and educational policy frame the conceptual map and future research directions prompted by this study.

NOTES

¹In this study, social class is defined by occupational status, education, and income level.

²This study focuses on the influence of social class on parent participation in schooling, and is not designed to examine the influence of social class on students' achievement.

³Each individual case study is treated as a "whole" study, in which convergent evidence is sought regarding the facts and conclusions for the case (Yin, 1989).

⁴Since the research questions for the study focus solely on the interaction between social class and school organizational structures and processes, participation was limited to white parents from each of the three schools in order to set aside the effects of race and ethnicity on family-school interactions.

⁵One parent from each of the three schools scheduled the interview at their place of employment. An interview with a parent from the magnet school took place at my home.

⁶Some families active in scouting identified this group as a source of adult friendship and socializing. Only two parents identified work associates as a source of social networking; both are high school teachers.

⁷Admissions to Carlton are conducted through a lottery. Students are assigned a priority number and accepted in order according to the ethnic/racial slots available at that time. In order to gain admission, students must demonstrate minimum grade-appropriate competencies. A large number of recorded

"poor" performances in academic subjects, unexcused absences, and behavioral problems are reasons for non-acceptance.

⁸Value communities describe a collection of people who share similar values about education, but do not exhibit a high degree of uniformity and cohesion within geographical, social, economic, and ideological boundaries (Coleman and Hoffer, 1987). They are strangers from various neighborhoods, backgrounds and occupations united around an educational organization--their children's school.

⁹Last year, in the first year that the participation requirement was formally enforced, 12 families (out of a total of 230) failed to complete their 40 hours and were asked to register their child/ren at another school for the following school year.

¹⁰The contract requires parents to participate 40 hours each school year and students to follow classroom rules, do their best work at all times, and attend school every day (unless they are ill).

¹¹Western school may be considered more heterogeneous in terms of the school's student population because it offers programs designed for students with special needs, (e.g., bilingual, special, and compensatory education programs). St. Martin's and Carlton school do not offer these programs, and as a consequence, may enroll a more homogeneous student population. The relative homogeneity in these two schools may account, in part, for the greater potential and realization of social cohesion among parents at St. Martin's and Carlton.

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