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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the insights of five social theorists regarding families, schools, and parent-teacher relations. The five theorists are: (1) Urie Bronfenbrenner, a child psychologist and advocate of public policies that support families, who argues that frequent, positive communication between parents and teachers creates the optimal conditions for child development; (2) Talcott Parsons, the sociologist primarily responsible for the development of structural/functional theory in American sociology, who contends parent-teacher contacts are not important beyond some minimal level since, in general, both teachers and parents share the same basic goals for children; (3) Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, a sociologist of education, who points to characteristics of family and school life that result in conflict and distancing between parents and teachers; (4) Jane Roland Martin, a philosopher of education and feminist, who focuses on the education of girls and women in order to understand the purposes of education for both males and females; and (5) Miriam David, a British social policy analyst who has combined Marxist and feminist perspectives in her studies of the politics of education. Each of the theorists is introduced in turn; their ideas are summarized, compared to those analyzed earlier, and critiqued. Issues raised by the theorists are summarized in the form of a list of questions for further research. (AC)

# Worlds Apart or Links Between: Theoretical Perspectives on Parent-Teacher Relationships

by

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## Abstract

Good relationships between parents and teachers are important to the success of students, yet they cannot be taken for granted. Most literature on this topic is based on the authors' own experiences or their evaluations of specific programs, with little reference to social or educational theory. This paper explores the theorizing of a child psychologist (Urie Bronfenbrenner), a sociologist (Talcott Parsons), a black sociologist of education (Sara Lawrence Lightfoot), a feminist philosopher of education (Jane Roland Martin) and a British social policy analyst (Miriam David), each of whom have had significant insights into families, schools and/or parent-teacher relations. Issues from this "conversation" are summarized in the form of a list of questions for further research.

## About the Author

John Maddaus is an assistant professor in foundations of education in the College of Education at the University of Maine, Orono. His interests in parent-teacher relations stem from experiences as a teacher and teacher educator, as well as parent and staff member of the Family Matters project led by Urie Bronfenbrenner. His primary area of research is parental choice of school. Other interests include: parental involvement, comparative education and educational policy-making.

## Introduction

Every weekday, 40 weeks a year, millions of children walk or ride busses from home to school and back home again. The present and future happiness and success of each of those children is the concern of adults in both home and school. Both sets of adults know that the other has considerable influence -- for good or ill -- on the children with whom they spend a considerable portion of their lives. Both would like the support of the other in carrying out their child-rearing/teaching tasks. But both sense that they cannot take it for granted that that support will be forth-coming.

The literature on parent-teacher relationships is large and growing. Much of it, however, consists of advice for one or both parties based on the author's own experiences, but with little or no reference to educational or social theory. Conversely, theorists dealing with schools and families have rarely spelled out the implications of their theorizing for parent-teacher relationships.

This paper explores the ideas of five social theorists, each with a different perspective to offer on parent-teacher relationships. Included in this paper are:

1. Urie Bronfenbrenner, a child psychologist and an advocate of public policies that support families, especially in their child-rearing roles (e.g. Headstart);

2. Talcott Parsons, a sociologist primarily responsible for the development of structural/functional theory in American sociology;

3. Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, a sociologist of education who has written extensively on effective teaching and schools;

4. Jane Roland Martin, a philosopher of education who has challenged the conventional wisdom of her discipline by introducing a feminist perspective; and

5. Miriam David, a British social policy analyst who has combined Marxist and feminist perspectives in her studies in the politics of education.

The format of this paper is modeled after the one employed by Martin in her book, Reclaiming a Conversation, in which she explored the contributions of Plato, Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, Beecher and Gilman to an understanding of women's education. Each of the five theorists is introduced in turn. Their ideas are summarized, compared to those analyzed earlier, and critiqued. Implications based on this "conversation" are then discussed in the conclusion.

## Urie Bronfenbrenner

Of the five theorists whose ideas are explored in this paper, Urie Bronfenbrenner is the most systematic in laying out definitions and hypotheses to be tested regarding parent-teacher relationships. His major theoretical work, The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design, was written and published in the late 1970's. At that time, he was launching a major research study on urban family life in the U.S. and four other nations. His book provides the conceptual framework underlying that study.

As the title of this book suggests, Bronfenbrenner is concerned with the influence of the social environment on human development, especially in children. He defines human development as:

> "the process through which the growing person acquires a more extended, differentiated and valid conception of the ecological environment, and becomes motivated and able to engage in activities that reveal the properties of, sustain or restructure that environment at levels of similar or greater complexity in form and content." (p. 27)

In short, he is concerned with the growing capacity of individuals to understand and shape their environments. The interaction of the individual and his/her environment, in all its complexity, is the focus of the discipline he calls the ecology of human development, which he defines as:

> "the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded." (p. 21)

Bronfenbrenner offers a model of the environment as a set of concentric circles with the child at the center. Moving out from the child are:

the "microsystem", defined as:

> "a pattern of activities, roles and inter-personal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics." (p. 22)

the "mesosystem", defined as:

"the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (such as, for a child, home, school and neighborhood peer group; for an adult, among family, work and social life." (p. 25)

the "exosystem", defined as:

"one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person." (p. 25)

and the "macrosystem", defined as:

"consistencies, in the form or content of lower order systems (micro-, meso- and exo-) that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a wnole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such constituencies." (p. 26)

The study of parent-teacher relationships falls within the portion of Bronfenbrenner's model refered to as the mesosystem. Specifically, he is interested in the relations between the settings of home and school, with the child providing the primary link between these settings. In Chapter 9, which focuses on the mesosystem, Bronfenbrenner asks, "what kinds of interconnections are possible, for example, between home and school?" (p. 209). Of the various types of links, he argues, "the most critical direct link between the two settings is the one that establishes the existence of the mesosystem in the first instance -- the setting transition that occurs when the person enters a new environment" (p. 210). If, for example, a child goes to school the first day unaccompanied by a parent, older sibling or other person known to him/her from another, prior, setting, then the setting transition has occurred by means of a "solitary link". If the child is accompanied by another person or persons, then a "dual" or "mulitiple" link has been formed between the home and school settings. Bronfenbrenner hypothesizes that

"the developmental potential of a setting in a microsystem is enhanced if the person's initial transition into that setting is not made alone, that is, if he enters the new setting in the company of one or more persons with whom he has participated in prior settings" (p. 211).

Characteristics of the two settings in relation to each other also are significant. Bronfenbrenner hypothesizes that

> "The developmental potential of settings in a mesosystem is enhanced if the role demands in the different settings are compatible and if the roles, activities and dyads in which the developing person engages encourage the development of mutual trust, a positive orientation, goal concensus between settings, and an evolving balance of power in favor of the developing person" (p. 212).

This hypothesis is significant in its emphasis on values and affective states, especially goal concensus between settings. But this seems to be in conflict, or at least in a state of tension, with another hypothesis, that

> "The positive developmental effects of participation in multiple settings are enhanced when the settings occur in cultural or subcultural contexts that are different from each other, in terms of ethnicity, social class, religion, age group, or other background factors" (p. 213).

In all, Bronfenbrenner states 17 hypotheses for the mesosystem in his effort to draw out the implications of his theoretical model. As regards relationships between home and school, he suggests that these hypotheses support

> "more frequent interaction between parents and school personnel, a greater number of persons known in common by members of the two settings, more frequent communications between home and school, and more information in each setting about the other" (p. 218).

But he is also aware that interconnections may be negative at times. Thus, the above applies, "always with the proviso that such interconnections not undermine the motivation and capacity of those persons who deal directly with the child to act in his/her behalf." Specifically, he gives "negative weight to actions by school personnel that degrade parents or to parental demands that undermine the professional morale and effectiveness of the teacher" (p. 218).

But while Bronfenbrenner is concerned about the possibility of negative interactions, his primary focus is on the decline in the frequency of interactions, rather than on their content or quality.

> "The school is becoming increasingly isolated from the home. As neighborhood schools disappear, the school buildings become farther away, larger and more impersonal. The staff increase in number, and are drawn from a larger area, and often commute,

rather than live in the local community. As a result, parents and teachers are less likely to know each other at all" (p. 230).

He concludes that schools, to the extent that they are isolated from the community they serve and provide little in the way of communal life within them, promote segregation on the basis of age. This in turn, he believes, contributes to alienation of students from society and to anti-social behaviors such as homicide, suicide, drug use and delinquency.

Bronfenbrenner's theorizing has interesting implications for current educational policies, in that he seems to suggest that given a choice among schools, parents should prefer schools that are located in their own communities and promote parental and other community involvement. But this assumes that both parents and teachers will take advantage of the convenience of having home and school in close proximity to find ways to work together to enhance student learning.

The hypotheses generated by Bronfenbrenner in The Ecology of Human Development were put to an initial test in a research project that he conceived and carried out with the help of two colleagues, Moncrieff Cochran and William Cross, and a large staff. The project, known as "Family Matters", involved extensive base-line interviews with about 300 families, each with a three-year-old child, followed by two and a half years of program activity with about half of the families, and then more interviews with the families when their children were six. Program activities included a variety of activities aimed at promoting communication between home and school (Dean, 1983). There were no program activities with teachers, but the children's first grade teachers filled out questionnaires at the end of the project. These questionnaires included questions regarding their contacts with the project parents.

In view of the major effort invested in encouraging program parents to initiate contacts with teachers, the results of this aspect of the program were disappointing. As long as children were perceived as not experiencing difficulty, contact between home and school was minimal. Even when children were perceived to be having difficulty, white, married families chose to deal with the situation themselves rather than initiating contact with the school. In the final project report (Cochran and Henderson, 1985), several possible explanations for these findings are suggested. A substantial number of project parents indicated that their own experiences with schools had been negative. Some positive indication on the part of schools that parent contact would be welcomed might have helped overcome the

residual effects of negative childhood experiences, but Family Matters made no effort to interact directly with teachers or other school personnel. And finally, the prevailing belief system of our culture, what Bronfenbrenner refers to as the macrosystem, may have discouraged contact. Cochran and Henderson elaborate on this final point:

> "The Family Matters program had as a conscious purpose the countering of what we refer to as the deficit model of support for family life... the evidence that home-school communications are generated in large measure by inadequacy on the part of the child fits the larger cultural pattern: a policy orientation, unquestioned by most of the parents themselves, that implies that home-school partnerships are appropriate as long as the family has a 'problem'. Aimed at remediation rather than prevention, even with first graders, this orientation encourages the maintenance of distance rather than closeness between parents and teachers, because contact has such clearly negative connotations (see also Lightfoot, 1978)" (p. 132).

In the chapter in The Ecology of Human Development that deals with the belief systems of the "macrosystem", Bronfenbrenner makes no mention of parent-teacher communications. Based on the evidence from the research project that he himself initiated and led, that may have been a serious omission.

One belief that is widespread in our culture is that schools are primarily responsible for the education of children. For parents to attempt to become partners in the education of their children may suggest either that they reject this belief (in which case they may be challenging the school's conception of its mission) or that they think the school is failing in achieving its mission (in which case they may be challenging the competence of the teachers). In either case, such a belief contributes to distancing between parents and teachers. The deficit model to which Cochran and Henderson refer allows for an exception to this more general rule: parents may become involved if there is something wrong with the child such that s/he does not perform up to expectations.

Bronfenbrenner may well be correct in arguing that frequent, positive communication between parent and teacher creates the optimal conditions for child development. But he fails to explore the belief systems of our culture to determine whether they support such communication. Nor does he inquire into a multitude of other related beliefs, such as what the essential purposes of education may be. Furthermore, although he acknowledges the existence of

differences in our society based on ethnicity, social class, religion, age and other background factors, he fails to explore how such social categories might effect the interactions between parents and teachers. In contrast to each of the other four theorists in this "conversation", he makes little explicit reference to gender, apparently assuming that it is a difference that makes no difference.

## Talcott Parsons

Among Talcott Parsons' voluminous writings, only a small portion deals explicitly with education. The single most important source for his thinking regarding schools is an article entitled "The School Class as a Social System: Some of Its Functions in American Society", which appeared in the Harvard Educational Review in 1959. Also important for an understanding of Parsons' views on parent-teacher relations is a book he co-authored with R.F. Bales and others, Family, Socialization and Interaction Process (1955), portions of which are briefly summarized in the HER article. (Quotes, unless the page number is preceded by FSIP, are from the HER article.)

Unlike Bronfenbrenner, who is primarily concerned with the development of the individual, Parsons is primarily concerned with the needs of adult society. He begins his essay on the school class with a statement of the problem:

> "Our main interest, then, is in a dual problem: first of how the school class functions to internalize in its pupils both the commitments and capacities for successful performance of their future adult roles, and second of how it functions to allocate these human resources within the role structure of the adult society" (p. 297).

The process of socialization into adult roles, in Parsons' view, actually begins in the family.

> "A primary function and characteristic of the family is that it should be a social group in which in the earliest stages the child... can become fully 'dependent'. But, at the same time, in the nature of the socialization process, this dependency must be temporary rather than permanent. The socializing agents should not themselves be too completely immersed in their family ties... a family should, in due course, help in emancipating the child from his dependency on the family. Hence, a family must be a differentiated subsystem

> of a society, not itself a "little society" or anything too closely approaching it. The adult members must have roles other than their familial roles which occupy strategically important places in their own personalities" (FSIP, p. 19).

This assessment of the position and role of the family with respect to the process of socialization is central to Parsons' argument regarding similarities and differences between mothers and teachers during the school years. He looks favorably on coeducation primarily because it orients women to the world outside the home and thus prepares them to carry out their roles as mothers more effectively.

Once children reach the school years, he argues that the school class is the "focal socializing agency" (p. 298), although he also recognizes that the family continues to play a role, as do informal peer groups, churches and various voluntary organizations. "The socialization functions of the family by this time are relatively residual, though their importance should not be underestimated" (p. 306). These socialization functions, responsibility for which is assigned primarily to the school class, include commitments and capacities:

> "... commitment to the implementation of the broad values of society, and commitment to the performance of a specific type of role within the structure of society.... Capacities can also be broken down into two components, the first being competence or the skill to perform the tasks involved in the individual's roles, and the second being "role-responsibility" or the capacity to live up to other people's expectations of the interpersonal behavior appropriate to these roles" (p. 298).

In addition to teaching each student these commitments and capacities, the school class also engages in the actual process of sorting out the relatively successful from the less successful in meeting these expectations. Parsons describes the function of the family at this stage as supporting the school in both its socialization and sorting functions. He argues that even before the child enters school the family will have begun this process by promoting independence and achievement in the child.

Parsons never explicitly addresses the issue of communication between parents and teachers. He does, however, describe both similarities and differences between "teacher-figures" and "parent-figures" at the elementary school level. The similarities include: (1) both have adult status; (2) both are normally women (relatively few men

teach in the elementary grades, and fathers are presumed to play minor roles in the home compared to mothers); (3) both are typically "diffuse" (rather than specific) in their broad set of expectations regarding both cognitive and affective learning (an aspect of the "feminine role"); (4) both may provide emotional support appropriate to the age of the child; (5) both are presumed to share the same set of values, especially achievement and independence, necessary as preparation for adult roles; and (6) both seek to maintain adult standards of behavior in opposition to disapproved behavior that may be sanctioned by the peer group.

Parsons also identifies several differences between elementary teachers and mothers. Teachers are presumed to: (1) be more oriented to performance (evaluated according to universalistic standards) rather than to the child's emotional "needs" (a particularistic orientation); (2) differentially reward achievement; (3) maintain a relationship with a given child for only one year, rather than for life, thus inhibiting any potential for developing strong emotional attachments. These differences are partly the result of school organization, but also reflect the function of the school as a sorting/selection agency.

Even with respect to universalistic vs. particularistic orientation, however, Parsons sees the family shifting in the direction of universalism as the child gets older:

> "his parents alter their roles since their reference gradually comes to be not to familial membership so much as to universalistic appraisal of the child's behavior. They sanction more and more as members of the community rather than as parents of this particular child" (FSIP, p. 117).

Parsons' views on the subject of gender are worth noting. Writing before the rediscovery of feminism in the 1960's and 70's, he makes numerous comments regarding "the feminine role". As an apparently negative example of "commitment to the performance of a specific type of role within the structure of society", he notes that

> "conversely, someone... might object to the anchorage of the feminine role in marriage and the family on the grounds that such anchorage keeps society's total talent resources from being distributed equitably to business, government, and so on" (p. 298).

Parsons seems to defend this "anchorage of the feminine role" in his defense of coeducation:

> "it is highly important that the woman's familial role should not be regarded as drastically segregated from the cultural concerns of the society as a whole. The educated woman has important functions as wife and mother, particularly as an influence on her children in backing the schools and impressing on them the importance of education" (p. 317).

But Parsons also recognizes that the "feminine role" may include "occupational and associational concerns", and he sees women teachers as making an important contribution to the socialization of children in this regard.

> "Through identification with their teacher, children of both sexes learn that the category 'woman' is not co-extensive with 'mother' (and future wife), but that the feminine role-personality is more complex than that" (p. 308).

This leads to a discussion of the once-controversial issue of married women as teachers, in which he suggests that society once demanded the separation of the maternal and occupational aspects of the "feminine role", but no longer sees this as necessary.

Parsons does not explore the implications of his views on the "feminine role" for parent-teacher communications. But he seems to suggest that because both parties are typically women (especially at the elementary level), they may share certain characteristics (e.g. "diffuseness") which could be interpreted as facilitating communication.

Thus, in Parsons' view, both teachers and parents share the same basic goals for children, related to adult success. And both share the assumption that the school will assume primary responsibility for achieving these goals once children reach school age, with families in a supportive role. While not addressing the issue of the conditions under which families (and teachers) might deviate from the patterns he describes, he clearly suggests that the dominant pattern is a concensus om goals between parents and teachers.

In the smoothly functioning social system described by Parsons, there appears to be little need for parent-teacher interaction at more than minimal levels. Everyone knows the allocation of responsibilities for socialization into the society, as well as the norms into which children are to be socialized. To a large extent, the cultural belief systems which Parsons described in 1959 are the same ones that, over twenty years later, appear to have shaped the behaviors of both teachers and parents in the Family Matters project

conducted by Bronfenbrenner and his colleagues.

In Parsons' view of the functions of schools and families, there is only one factor that might seriously interfere with the generally harmonious and stable social order that he envisions: social class. He noted that with respect to occupational status, "the main dividing line is between those who are and are not enrolled in the college preparatory course in high school" (p. 299). Furthermore, in the determination of who prepares for and subsequently enters college, "ascriptive as well as achieved factors influence the outcome" (p. 299). In other words, both father's occupational status and student academic performance have a bearing on the probabilities of college attendance. (NOTE: The study on which this conclusion is based involved boys only.) Parsons then moves on to explore the role of schools and families with respect to achievement, while disregarding the role of father's occupational status in the social selection process.

Toward the end of the article, Parsons returns briefly to the issue of social class in the selection process, focusing on the "indifference" to school performance of students of relatively high ability but low social status.

> "Those pupils who are exposed to contrdictory pressures are likely to be ambivalent; at the same time, the personal stakes for them are higher than for the others, because what happens in school may make much more of a difference for their futures than for the others, in whom ability and family status point to the same expectations for the future. In particular for the upwardly mobile pupils, too much emphasis on school success would pointedly suggest 'burning their bridges' of association with their families and status peers" (p. 312).

In other words, such students may be subject to conflicting expectations from school and family. While teachers uphold the norm of achievement according to ability, relatives and friends may resist striving for levels of achievement that would lead to markedly higher occupational status and thus different lifestyles. While this analysis would suggest the possibility of direct conflict between parents and teachers, Parsons does not explore the implications of this situation for his otherwise harmonious view of the socialization process. His view of society as a system, with component parts have structures and functions, does not seem to lead to an exploration of cases of "dysfunction", whether of families or of schools, or of the relations between them.

## Sara Lawrence Lightfoot

Bronfenbrenner's primary concern is to promote linkages between home and school in the interests of enhancing the development of children. Parsons, on the other hand, emphasizes the smooth operation of the social system in carrying out its socialization and selection functions, thus suggesting that parent-teacher contacts are not important beyond some minimal level (e.g. report cards). But despite what would appear to be their differing assessments of the need for parent-teacher interactions, both seem to imply that harmonious parent-teacher relationships are the norm.

In contrast, Sara Lawrence Lightfoot devotes a great deal of attention in her book, Worlds Apart: Relationships Between Families and Schools, to characteristics of family and school life which, she argues, result in conflict and/or distancing between parents and teachers. Ironically, one of her explanations for conflict and distancing is based on the structural/functional theory of Talcott Parsons.

> "Some of the discontinuities between family and school emerge from differences in their structural properties and cultural purpose. In other words, conflicts are endemic to the very nature of the family and the school as institutions.... In families, the interactions are functionally diffuse in the sense that the participants are intimately and deeply connected and their rights and duties are all-encompassing and taken for granted. In schools, the interactions are functionally specific because the relationships are more circumscribed and defined by the technical competence and individual status of the participants.
>
> "The relationships are not only differentiated in terms of scope but also in terms of affectivity, the quality and depth of the personal interactions.... Children in the family are treated as special persons, but pupils in schools are necessarily treated as members of categories. From these different perspectives develop the particularistic expectations that parents have for their children and the universalistic expectations of teachers. In other words, when parents ask teachers to 'be fair' with their child..., they are usually asking that the teacher give special attention to their child... When teachers talk about being 'fair'to everyone, they mean giving equal amounts of attention..." (pp. 21-22).

Although the sociological concepts used in these passages are clearly derived from Parsons, Lightfoot's analysis of families and schools with respect to these concepts is radically different from Parsons' own views as summarized above. While Lightfoot cites Parsons' article on the school class as a social system directly, her interpretation of that article is clearly through the work of one of Parsons' students, Robert Dreeben. Dreeben's book, On What Is Learned in School, is cited for both the preceding quotation and this one:

> "Following the Parsonian model, Robert Dreeben sees the classroom as a microcosm of the wider society -- a reflection of the norms and values of the corporate world beyond the school. He suggests that schooling experiences impart to children the norms necessary to sustain 'organic solidarity' in society.
>
> "'The argument of this volume rests on the assumptions that schools through their structural arrangements and the behavior patterns of teachers, provide pupils with certain experiences largely unavailable in other social settings, and that these experiences, by virtue of their peculiar characteristics, represent conditions conducive to the acquisition of norms'" (pp. 24-25).

Whereas Parsons portrayed the family as supportive of the schools in guiding children toward adult roles, Dreeben, followed by Lightfoot, portrays families and schools as being at odds with respect to socialization. Where Parson describes families and schools as sharing some similar features (teachers as well as parents may have diffuse expectations, parents as well as teachers may support an emphasis on achievement and evaluate children by universalistic standards), Dreeben and Lightfoot choose to portray families and schools in terms of a series of contrasts (ascriptive status in the family vs. achieved status in schools, particularistic demands of parents vs. universalistic expectations of teachers). The implications of these differing assessments for parent-teacher relationships are enormous. Where Parsons seems to imply harmony, for both Dreeben and Lightfoot parents and teachers are "worlds apart".

Fortunately, Lightfoot provides evidence regarding these issues, in the form of ethnographic accounts of the perspectives of two first grade teachers, Ms. Powell and Ms. Sarni, with regard to their relationships with the parents of their students. Included in the account of Ms. Powell are

three case studies of her relationships with the mothers of three of her students. Due to the "thick" ethnographic descriptions we are offered, it is possible to assess these cases with respect to the concepts and interpretations of structural/functional theory.

Although both Ms. Sarni and Ms. Powell are portrayed as very capable teachers, they differ markedly in their beliefs about the purposes of schooling and the roles of parents in relation to those purposes.

> "To Ms. Sarni, the work of the first grade teacher is straight-forward and indisputable. She is hired to teach children how to read; that is the primary agenda of her classroom and she holds herself accountable to that task" (p. 117).

Ms. Sarni is a clearcut case of a teacher with very specific expectations, both for herself and for her students: reading.

In contrast, Ms. Powell's expectations for her students (and therefore for herself as well) are more diffuse, as she "works toward the balanced development of social and intellectual skills" (p. 90). As a black person whose family came from the West Indies, "she strongly believes that school should be a place where children move beyond the narrow boundaries of their families and learn to productively relate to children from a variety of backgrounds" (p. 88).

Ms. Sarni's views of parents, derived from her own experiences as the child of Italian immigrants, are likewise clearly defined.

> "Parents should be seen, not heard. Ms. Sarni... believes very strongly that their primary function should be external and peripheral to the life of the school. They should provide a strong, firm and nurturant home environment with two sturdy parents who support and uphold the 'traditional American values'. But parents should not become involved in the educational process within schools; neither should they criticize the efforts and values of the teachers" (p. 108).

To use Parsons' terminology, Ms. Sarni believes that parents have a role to play with respect to teaching "commitments" (values), but that it is her job, as a professional, to teach the "capabilities" (skills). She prefers to keep these responsibilities separate and distinct, and to maintain as much distance as possible between herself and the parents of her students.

Ms. Powell, on the other hand, favors much more interaction with parents, for reasons that are rather similar to Bronfenbrenner's reasons for advocating such contacts.

> "she views her interactions with parents as secondary dialogues -- relationships that can enhance or inhibit productive interactions with the child. Ms. Powell chooses to focus on the child's present individuality, with minimal reference to his future status in the adult world.... her observations reveal a teacher whose primary focus is children, who strives to build collaborative relationships with parents in order to support the development of children, and who deeply believes that her professional wisdom should be incorporated into the parents' visions of the child" (pp. 88-89).

Ms. Powell's beliefs lead her to engage in extensive contacts with parents, three cases of which are summarized by Lightfoot. Karen's mother makes particularistic demands on behalf of her daughter, but these demands are very specific, in contrast to Ms. Powell's more diffuse set of expectations for first graders. As members of a two-person household, Steven had become very dependent on, as well as spoiled by, his mother. Ms. Powell was able to persuade Steven's mother that she should allow him to become more independent of her. Luther, a black child, was effectively abandoned by his single mother and left in the reluctant care of an older sister. Ms. Powell "feels a deep responsibility for this child", who has "great potential -- a potential that will die if she doesn't make a critical intervention" (p. 103). Lightfoot describes Ms. Powell as having an "almost motherly" attachment for Luther, which leads her to make special (particularistic) efforts on his behalf, to the extent of harboring a "secret wish to take him over and protect him from further abuse" (p. 105).

In summary, Lightfoot's case studies of these two teachers reveal a sharp contrast in beliefs and in actual relationships. Given this contrast, broad generalizations about what teachers in general believe may not be very helpful. In the case of Ms. Powell, it appears that her orientation depends on the needs of the individual child, as she resists demands that she provide special consideration for Karen while desperately wishing to provide just such consideration for Luther.

In addition the the differences of structure, function and norms which Lightfoot adopts from Dreeben, Lightfoot provides two other theoretical arguments for believing that conflict and distancing may be expected between parents and teachers. One argument flows from the evidence that both

teaching and parenting are devalued activities in American society. The other argument focuses on differences of social class.

In a chapter entitled "The Other Woman: Mothers and Teachers", Lightfoot argues that first mothers and then teachers are at the center of the socialization process. But despite the importance which society attaches to the outcomes of this process, the adult roles and the women in them are typically devalued and blame is typically assigned to one or the other adult if children fail to live upt to expectations. The result of this situation may be that both mother and teacher will try to assert as much control as possible for as long as possible. For the mother (as in the case of Steven, referred to above), this may take the form of "overprotectiveness", "unrealistic" perceptions of her child and demands for special treatment on the part of teachers. Lightfoot suggests that "feelings of anxiety and threat are accompanied by deep feelings of competition and concern that the 'other woman' might do a better job and might capture the heart and attachments of the child" (p. 191). For the teacher, as in the case of Ms. Sarni outlined above, this same need for control may take the form of "territoriality" -- i.e. efforts to exclude parents from school and define their roles solely in terms of what goes on at home -- and demands that parents respect her professional status and need for autonomy.

There are also conflicts, Lightfoot suggests, arising out of differential status and power. Since teaching is generally conceived of as a "middle class" occupation, these status differences can operate in two directions. On the one hand, there is the devaluing of teachers by those, such as Karen's mother, who are higher on the status/power ladder, particularly in academia and the professions. On the other hand, in the case of schools in low income, immigrant and/or minority communities,

> "There is mistrust, suspicion, and even rejection of the professionals who attempt to educate, serve and direct community residents.... The schools... force a direct confrontation with the peer-oriented society as they evaluate and rank neighborhood children by criteria that are meaningless and alien to the community. The aspirations and hopes that teachers arouse offer distant promises that tend to pull the children away from the community and away from their sources of comfort, structure and stability" (p. 193).

Lightfoot thus summarizes the situation of the high ability student from a low status family background, as discussed by Parsons, but from the perspectives of parents and community

rather than professionals. The problem is complicated further by the realities of what Parsons refers to as the schools' selection function. For the perspectives of low income and minority families, it might better be described as a de-selection or screening out function, since that is what usually happens to their children. Lightfoot explains,

> "In a recent observational study done in lower- and middle-class public schools in New York, anthropologist Eleanor Burke Leacock noted the strong class interests of school bureaucracies and found... systematic patterns of discrimination and differentiation. The social relations of the educational process mirrored the social relations of the work roles into which students were likely to move... Middle-class students were rewarded for individuality, aggressiveness and initiative, while lower-class students were reinforced for passivity, withdrawl and obedience. There is... an illusion of mobility and assimilation through schooling that creates distance and hostility betwen middle-class-oriented teachers and lower-class parents, while in reality the educational system serves less to change the results of primary socialization in the home than to reinforce (and denigrate) and render them in adult form" (p. 31).

In other words, the fairness that Parsons perceives in the ways that schools carry out their selection/sorting function is not perceived by low status individuals and communities. Rather, from the bottom, schools are perceived as agents of social control maintaining the status quo of social relations in American society. Rather than the harmony of shared values that Parsons projects, Lightfoot offers the conflicts that arise from an unfair competitive process in which schools act as agents of social control in low income communities.

In her discussion of structural and normative differences between families and schools derived from Parsons by way of Dreeben, Lightfoot suggests that "part of the dissonance between families and schools appears to be functional to the growth, socialization and liberation of children" (p. 25). Earlier, she argues that "we must learn to distinguish between the positive and negative forms of dissonance" (p. 20).

But in her analysis of conflicts growing out of differences in race and class, Lightfoot seems critical of structural/functionalism and more hopeful about the prospects for parent-teacher collaboration.

> "Not only have social scientists largely neglected the dynamic, evolving relationships between families and schools, but they have not given careful attention to the perspectives of parents who are trying to communicate their concerns and negotiate the complexities of the school system.... The literature offers a distorted, oversimplified picture -- one that emphasizes the dissonance and inequalities between home and school and justifies the hardened stereotypes about parent groups" (p. 35)

Later, in her chapter entitled "Black Dreams and Closed Doors", she calls for collaboration between black families and schools. First, she argues the both researchers and practitioners should "recognize the powerful and critical role of family as educator" (p. 170). Second, she appeals for a concensus on goals.

> "Children seem to learn and grow in schools where parents and teachers share similar visions and collaborate on guiding children forward... The magic of suburban schools is not merely the relative affluence and abundant resources of the citizens (nor their whiteness) but also the consonance between what the parents want for their children and what teachers believe is educationally sound" (p. 171).

She believes that "the cultural and historical presence of black families and communities" must be "infused into the daily interactions and educational processes of children" (p. 175). Finally, she concludes that "the collaboration of black families and schools is the only hope for the successful schooling of black children" (p. 175).

Bronfenbrenner could readily accept Lightfoot's call for collaboration and for a consensus on goals. Her appeal for infusing black culture into schools attended by black children may or may not be compatible with his appeal for children experiencing cultural diversity. This raises complex issues of integration and multicultural education.

Even though Lightfoot's title comes from Parsons by way of Dreeben, she seems to reject a fundamental assumption of Parsons: that all children are to be socialized and selected for entry into an adult society that is essentially white and middle class. To infuse black culture into schools implies that the children in those schools will be prepared for entry into something other than the white adult world, unless the white culture is also transformed.

## Jane Roland Martin

As a philosopher and a feminist, Jane Roland Martin argues that we must explore what philosophers -- both men and women -- have had to say about the education of girls and women in order to understand the purposes of education for both males and females. In Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman, she is critical of most contemporary philosophers of education for failing to take women's education seriously.

> "Philosophers do not construct theories of education in a vacuum. Viewing education as preparation for carrying on societal roles, they tie their proposals to some vision of the good society. And insofar as the society the philosopher pictures is peopled by both sexes, we cannot evaluate the educational ideal it holds up for males unless we know its expectations for females" (pp. 5-6).

Parsons believed that the purpose of the school class is to prepare students for adult roles -- specifically, the feminine role anchored in marriage and the family, and the masculine role anchored in work outside the home. Martin asks that we re-examine our assumptions about the roles of men and women, especially in relation to the education we offer boys and girls. Who should engage in child-rearing tasks? And what education is necessary for them to do so successfully?

At this point, Martin introduces an important distinction between "reproductive" and "productive" processes. By "reproductive processes", she means not only conception and birth, but also child-rearing and associated family and household tasks. "Productive processes" on the other hand, are those economic, political and cultural activities commonly associated with public life. Martin argues that along with women's education, the traits, functions and tasks historically associated with women have also been devalued and neglected.

> "In the United States in the late twentieth century, we may reject a sex-based division of labor, but we must not forget that many of the tasks and functions that have traditionally been assigned to women are essential to the existence of society and must be carried out well if we are to have any chance of creating a better world" (p. 6).

Like Bronfenbrenner, Martin detects an unacceptable level of anti-social behavior in our society. But she

explains that behavior as resulting from the inappropriate content of education in our schools.

> "The statistics on child abuse and domestic violence in our society today belie the assumption that the knowledge, skills, attitudes and traits of character necessary for effectively carrying out the reproductive processes of society occur naturally in people. Education for these processes is... as essential as education for society's productive processes..." (p. 6).

In her exploration of the ideas of philosophers who have discussed women's education, Martin focuses much attention on the question of whether women's education should emphasize the rational or the emotional, and whether it should be directed to the productive or reproductive processes. In many respects, she concludes, contemporary American educators have provided for all students the same education that Plato advocated for his guardian class in The Republic: an education grounded in rational understanding and geared toward the productive processes. The major difference is that Plato did not expect his guardians -- either male or female -- to engage in child-rearing. Martin questions whether females can be expected to achieve the same success as males when offered an education originally designed for males, but at least it is an education consistent with the adult roles to be performed.

An examination of the philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft provides Martin with an opportunity to explore the question of whether an education designed with males in mind will be appropriate for women who are expected to devote at least a part of their energies to raising children. Martin describes Wollstonecraft as an eighteenth century rationalist and daughter of the Enlightenment. In A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), Wollstonecraft rejected Rousseau's contention (in Emile) that women were essentially irrational and thus suited only for the role of wife/mother. She sought to demonstrate that women are capable of rational thought, that women would still be capable of performing their domestic duties if the rights of men are extended to them, and that women deserve the same political rights as men. The education that she sought for girls and women is essentially that of men, geared to prepare the recipient for participation in public life. But since Wollstonecraft rejects the notion of a mothering instinct, Martin concludes that women cannot be expected to become good mothers unless their educations in some way also prepare them for that role. In support of her conclusion that the internal logic of Wollstonecraft's argument requires education for mothering, Martin adds,

"Needless to say, education cannot by itself solve large-scale social problems. Neither child abuse nor incest will disappear just because an effort is made to help people become nurturant and caring. But that education is not a social panacea does not mean that it can do no good at all. In individual instances an education for nurturance and care may improve the quality of mothering; in some cases it may even prevent harm from being done to children" (p. 96).

Catherine Beecher, in A Treatise on Domestic Economy (1842), offered an alternative justification for providing girls and women with a rational education. She argued that education is essential to proper management of a household (and also to teaching, though Martin does not explore Beecher's crusade for opportunities for educated women to become teachers). Furthermore, the most important part of a housewife's duties is the education of her children, especially the formation of their moral characters. It is the successful performance of this task that gives a woman an influence over the destiny of a nation, and a claim to equality with her husband. Martin rejects Beecher's acceptance of separate spheres of activity for females (the home) and males (work and citizenship). But she supports the idea that mothers are important educators of their children.

Martin's fifth philosopher is Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the author of the feminist utopian novel Herland (1915). Gilman imagined a society composed only of women and maintained through asexual reproduction. Such a utopian vision enabled her to dispense with many characteristics of American society as she knew it. In her utopian society, the education of the young, beginning in infancy, is the highest calling. Furthermore, it is a distinctively nurturing, child-centered education, aimed at promoting the child's own interests while simultaneously holding up the needs of the society for consideration. The distinction between rational and emotional capacities is rejected in favor of a meshing of the two. Productive processes are grounded in caring for the community and for the natural environment in which it exists. Finally, the distinction between public life and private life is abandoned, as child-rearing becomes the reponsibility of the community as a whole, rather than of the nuclear family.

Gilman's vision of a child-centered education has survived, but in other respects the divisions of society in Gilman's day still prevail. Beecher's efforts helped give rise to the teaching of what we now call home economics in American schools. To the extent that child development and parenting skills have been introduced in American schools, it is usually through the home economics program. But it is

Wollstonecraft's vision that has largely prevailed in American education. In most respects, girls now receive the same education as boys, and efforts are being made to further narrow what little gap remains between the sexes. Furthermore, that common education is primarily directed toward the productive processes of society. Home economics, in general, is not usually viewed as an important part of the curriculum, especially for those students who are perceived to have the ability to succeed at what are thought of as more important and challenging subjects, the ones deemed essential for those going on to college.

Based on this overview of women's education, Martin concludes that education for reproductive processes should be provided for both females and males. She calls for an end to the devaluing of activities traditionally associated with females, and urges that nurturing capacities and the ethics of care be infused throughout the curriculum (rather than addressed only in home economics courses that have low status). She rejects the distinction between child-rearing and education, suggesting that it is a distinction rooted in the separation of caring from reason. She argues for a gender-sensitive education, on the basis that common outcomes cannot be achieved through the same educational experiences because of the different societal experiences of males and females in our culture.

What, then, are the implications of this analysis for parent-teacher relationships? Martin, like Parsons, does not specifically address this issue, yet some inferences seem justified on the basis of her account of women's education.

Martin would hardly be surprised by the "other woman" problem described by Lightfoot. She would readily acknowledge that American society still places much of the responsibility for both teaching and parenting on women, and that these activities are consequently devalued. She would urge teachers to recognize and reinforce parents' efforts to participate in the education their children, rather than discounting parents' contributions in an effort to enhance their own contested status as professionals. She would certainly urge that men acquire the appropriate skills and become involved in parenting and teaching activities. She would probably be concerned that women as well as men, based on their shared education, might lack some of the skills they might need to care for children, as well as for each other. She might advocate more parenting education, as well as changes in teacher education to make it more sensitive to reproductive processes and the effects of traditional gender differences. Infusing an ethics of caring throughout the curriculum, she might argue, would have the additional advantage of making education at school more similar to education at home, thus facilitating mutual recognition of each other's efforts and more frequent collaboration.

## Miriam David

As a Marxist, Miriam David introduces two new elements into our conversation regarding relationships between parents and teachers: the state (government) and the corporation. On the cover of her book, The State, the Family and Education (1980), is a cartoon that symbolizes her assessment of the influence of these two institutions. A girl is depicted as a puppet, with the strings manipulated by jointly by two other figures: a father (with mother and infant beside him) and a teacher (also male). But these adult figures are also puppets of a much larger figure, only the feet of which are visible. The cartoon thus suggests that the (corporate) state has a major, if largely unseen, influence on the family and the school, and thus on children. To be more specific, her underlying assumption is

> "that the State uses the 'family-education couple' to maintain and reinforce both class and sexual divisions and that these divisions are necessary for the reproduction of the conditions of the capitalist economy" (p. 239).

None of the other parties to this conversation have suggested that the state has a major role in parent-teacher relations. To be sure, Bronfenbrenner provides a space in his model (which he calls the exosystem) for those settings in which the child does not participate but which nevertheless influence the child's own settings. He also discusses the importance of government agencies and the parents' workplaces for family life. But he does not make any direct link between such institutions and parent-teacher relationships. One could argue that the existence of large schools cut off from local communities is the product of government and corporate decision-making. But although Bronfenbrenner is critical of such schools, he never stops to ask why it is that they exist.

Similarly, Parsons describes the functions of schools in relation to adult roles without discussing why it is that the roles are what they are, or why the functions of schools have been defined in relation to them. Lightfoot, in a passage quoted above, refers to "the norms and values of the corporate world beyond school" (p. 24), but does not discuss how and why these impact the school, the family, or the relationship between the two. And Martin is critical of the schools' almost exclusive concern with productive processes, without inquiring as to the origins of that concern. In short, all the other participants in this conversation take the economic and political structures of our society as givens, not to be questioned.

David differs from our other theorists in two other

respects as well. Her basic method is historical, in the sense of tracing the history of government policies toward schools and families. And she is British, using British government and society as her sole source of evidence for conclusions. Her narrative begins in the early nineteenth century, at a time when parents had virtually unlimited authority over their children. She traces the development of British social legislation, including in particular compulsory education and the extension of formal education into the early years and into adolescence. For example, the Plowden Report (1967), which sought ways to improve primary education, states

> "'Our argument is that educational policy should explicitly recognize the power of the environment. Teachers are linked to parents by children for whom they are both responsible. The triangle should be completed and a more direct relationship established between teachers and parents. They should be partners in more than name; their responsibility become joint instead of several'" (p. 89).

Like Headstart and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (especially Title I), the Plowden report and subsequent initiatives were directed primarily to older, inner city areas where

> "there was a high turnover of both pupils and teachers and no necessary coincidence of values between parents and teachers. It, therefore, felt that such children were educationally deprived and handicapped and needed a 'new distribution of educational resources'" (p. 89).

David goes on to explain that in implementing the Plowden Report

> "a major policy focus was on the improvement of maternal behavior through the development of a new partnership between the State and mothers over child-rearing. Mothers were to be shown, through attending school on a daily or regular basis, how to care for their young children. They were not enabled to take on activities such as paid employment while their children were in nurseries but were expected to be regularly involved in such education. The State's need to reinforce familial, and traditional maternal, values was now more explicit. It was necessary in a situation where the deprivation of inner city areas contrasted starkly with the affluence of other residential areas" (p. 90-91).

Bronfenbrenner, who was involved in the early development of Headstart, might look at the British government initiatives that followed the Plowden Report and find little to criticize in what was done. Parental involvement, thought of as support for parents in their child-rearing role, was also a key program element in Headstart, and for much the same reasons. But David finds the Plowden Report equivalents unacceptable.

> "Having identified problems in society, instead of attacking the way the social and economic system worked as the root cause, the Committee blamed those who suffered society's ills. Mothers were explicitly accused" (p. 90).

Not only does David object to the tone in which government leaders talked about poor and working class mothers, but she rejects the government's solutions for failing, as she sees it, to get at the root problems.

The British government's approach to parental involvement for middle class mothers, in David's view, is quite different. She notes the controversies in the 1970's over the Labour government's effort to introduce comprehensive secondary schools in place of the more selective grammar schools favored by the middle class. The outcomes of these controversies have indicated "the extent to which middle class parents have been able to preserve the educational system for their own ends, rather than for changing social relationships" (p. 182). She notes that

> "the State's recent encouragement of both individual and collective parental involvement has resulted in reactionary measures in schooling -- especially returns toward more traditional methods of teaching" (p. 246).

But she adds that parental involvement "may be highly progressive, if it is used to include working class parents in decision-making" (p. 247). She provides little eveidence, however, that this latter situation is actually occurring.

Although she does not say so explicitly, David implies that parent-teacher relationships will be very different depending on the social class of the parents involved. Poor and working class parents will be criticized for their deviations from middle class child-rearing practices, while middle class parents will find acceptance and encouragement of their wishes, if not from the school staff (the apparently rare exception) then certainly from the government.

In addition to being a Marxist, David is also a

feminist. She believes, for example, that the treatment of working class and poor women by the British government following the Plowden Report is unacceptable, on the grounds that it perpetuated the subordinate position of women in society. She notes that

> "feminists have tried to locate the analysis of female disadvantages in capitalism to the sexual division of labour and particularly to the position of women within the family" (p. 3),

and she identifies her own work with this perspective. This is a very different perspective than the feminist perspective adopted by Martin. Martin is very critical of the neglect of women's education by theorists and the absence of education for reproductive processes in the schools. David, on the other hand, observes a great deal of what she describes as "'familial ambiance'" (p. 7) in the schools, and she does not approve of what she sees. For example, in the late 19th century, "The early Codes of Regulations required that the sexual division of labor be taught and understood..." (p. 241). Furthermore, there was a strong distinction made along class lines, such that

> "Working class girls leant domestic subjects to equip them to be not only wives and mothers, but also domestic servants. Middle class girls, by contrast, were taught the skills of household management" (p. 241).

Though there has been some decline in the specific teaching of household skills in recent years, as well as some support for having boys as well as girls exposed to what remains of this gender-based curriculum, David remains skeptical of any inclusion of family-related learning in the curriculum, on the grounds that it perpetuates the subordinate position of women.

In summary, David believes that the extent and content of parent-teacher relationships are largely dependent on the ideological positions of the corporate state with respect to social class and gender. The government, whichever party may be in control, seeks to maintain and strengthen the economic structures of capitalism by reinforcing class differences and by perpetuating the subordinate status of women. Part of its energies are devoted to promoting working class acceptance of prevailing social divisions. Thus, parents (i.e. mothers) who accept the requirements of capitalism will be respected, especially if they are middle class and do not work outside the home. Parents who do not conform to middle class standards of behavior and espouse middle class values will be much more likely to encounter hostility from school staff and/or government officials.

## Conclusions

Based on this "conversation", the following questions, addressed in some way by two or more of the theorists whose writings have been reviewed above, seem important to explore with regard to parent-teacher relationships:

1. To what extent do parents and teachers agree on what the basic purposes of education are for girls and for boys, and on how these purposes ought to be reflected in the curriculum, teaching methods, etc.?

2. What beliefs do parents and teachers have about the amount and style of parent-teacher interactions and parental involvement, and are these beliefs compatible?

3. To what extent do parents and teachers view child-rearing and teaching as valued activities, and what could be done to make these more highly valued?

4. To what extent do parents and teachers think of education as beginning in the home and continuing at home even after children enter school?

5. To what extent do both women and men participate in parent-teacher interactions? What difference does the gender of the participants (or of the child) make?

6. Do parents and teachers share similar racial/ethnic and social class backgrounds, or if not, are they tolerant of each other's backgrounds?

7. Do parents and teachers agree on the social norms that children should learn and on the allocation of responsibility for teaching such norms?

8. To what extent do parents consider what is best for all children in a class, school, community or country, as opposed to what is best for their own child, in their interactions with teachers?

9. To what extent do government agencies and other institutions outside the immediate school-community environment seek to influence families, schools and/or parent-teacher relationships, and what are the affects of such outside influences?

10. To what extent is the child an active participant in interactions involving parents and teachers?

In addition, each theorist has raised questions not addressed by the others.

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