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Social Intervention: Potential and Constraints

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Contents

Part I

Theoretical Approaches to Prevention and Intervention

1. Prevention and Intervention in the Analytical Perspective of Guidance
Franz –Xaver Kaufmann 3
2. Observation, Diagnosis, Guidance. A Systems Theoretical View on Intervention
Helmut Willke 21
3. Powerlessness, Politics, and Prevention.
The Community Mental Health Approach
George W. Albee 37
4. The Stress Process and Strategies of Intervention
Leonard I. Pearlin 53

Part II

Children's Services and Preschool Programs

5. Professionalism and Children's Services
Barbara Heyns 75
6. Evidence of Problem Prevention by
Early Childhood Education
Lawrence J. Schweinhart and David P. Weikart 87

Part III

Family Empowerment and Parent Involvement

7. Empowering Families: An Alternative to the Deficit Model
Moncrieff Cochran 105
8. Toward a Theory of Family –School Connections:
Teacher Practices and Parent Involvement
Joyce L. Epstein 121
9. Conditions of Family Functioning
Angelika Engelbert and Alois Herlth 137
10. Intervention in the Family: The Case
of Handicapped Children
Giovanni B. Sgritta 151

Part IV

Problem Behavior in Adolescence

11. Developmental Transitions and Adolescent Problem
Behavior: Implications for Prevention and Intervention
Anne C. Petersen and Aaron Ebata 167

12. Adolescent Problem Behavior in the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany: Implications for Prevention Stephen F. Hamilton	185
13. Developmental Perspectives on Problem Behavior and Prevention in Adolescence Rainer K. Silbereisen, Peter Noack, and Matthias Reitzle	205
14. The Limits and Potential of Social Intervention in Adolescence: An Exemplary Analysis Klaus Hurrelmann	219

Part V

Scholastic Achievement and Educational Career Planning

15. Diagnosis and Intervention in Education and Therapy Brigitte A. Rollett	241
16. Intervention in the Transition from School to Work for Early School Leavers John C. Weidman	253
17. Social Intervention Strategies in Elite U.S. Secondary Schools Caroline Hodges Persell and Peter W. Cookson, Jr.	269

Part VI

Social Intervention and Social Control

18. Psychological Crime Prevention: Concepts, Evaluations and Perspectives Friedrich Lösel	289
19. Alternative Methods of Conflict – Settling and Sanctioning: Their Impact on Young Offenders Günter Albrecht and Susanne Karstedt – Henke	315
20. Evaluating Residential Treatments for Delinquents: A Cautionary Tale Derek Cornish	333
21. Preventive Effects of Correctional Intervention: Reeducation and Resocialization of Juvenile Prisoners Wolfgang Wirth	347
22. Simulating Social Order – Community and Crime Control Reinhard Kreissl	363

Appendix

23. The Program of the Special Research Unit "Prevention and Intervention in Childhood and Adolescence"	383
Author Index	389
Subject Index	397

SOCIAL PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE,

a new international and interdisciplinary book series from de Gruyter, presents comprehensive research on the causes and effects of disorders and impairments affecting the development of children and adolescents in highly industrialized societies. Covering such diverse topics as

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8. Toward a Theory of Family – School Connections: Teacher Practices and Parent Involvement

Joyce L. Epstein

1. Three Perspectives on Family – School Relations

Three perspectives currently guide researchers and practitioners in their thinking about family and school relations:

- Separate responsibilities of families and schools
- Shared responsibilities of families and schools
- Sequential responsibilities of families and schools.

The three perspectives are profoundly different. Assumptions based on the *separate* responsibilities of institutions stress the inherent incompatibility, competition, and conflict between families and schools. This perspective assumes that school bureaucracies and family organizations are directed, respectively, by educators and parents whose different goals, roles, and responsibilities are best fulfilled independently. It asserts that the distinct goals of the two institutions are achieved most efficiently and effectively when teachers maintain their professional, universalistic standards and judgments about the children in their classrooms, and when parents maintain their personal attention, and particularistic standards and judgments about their children at home (Parsons, 1959; Waller, 1932; Weber, 1947).

The opposing assumptions based on *shared* responsibilities of institutions emphasize the coordination, cooperation, and complementarity of schools and families, and encourage communication and collaboration between the two institutions. This perspective assumes that schools and families share responsibilities for the socialization and education of the child. Teachers and parents are believed to share common goals for their children that are achieved most effectively when teachers and parents work together. These assumptions are based on models of inter-institutional interactions and ecological designs that emphasize the natural, nested, and necessary connections between individuals and their groups and organizations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Leichter, 1974; Litwak and Meyer, 1974).

The third perspective on the *sequential* responsibilities of institutions emphasizes the critical stages of parents' and teachers' contributions to child development. This approach is based on the belief that the early years of a child's life are critical for later success, and that by age 5 or 6 when the child enters formal schooling in kindergarten or grade 1, the child's personality and attitudes toward learning are well established. Parents teach

their young children needed skills, arrange educational programs and experiences, and are guided or supported by social and educational agencies (e.g., pediatricians, preschool teachers, the media and others) to prepare their children for school. At the time of formal entry to school, the teacher assumes the major responsibility for educating children (Bloom, 1964; Freud, 1937; Piaget and Inhelder, 1969).

1.1 Understanding the Contrasting Theories: Mechanisms Producing Family-School Relations

In addition to the three major theoretical distinctions between separate, shared, and sequential responsibilities, there are other theories that help explain the *mechanisms* for building family and school relations and the resulting variations in the connections between institutions and their members. Among the most useful are symbolic interactionist and reference group theories. Symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) assumes that self-concept, personality, values, and beliefs are products of our interactions with others. The theory suggests that we learn how others perceive and anticipate our goals and behaviors, and that we fashion our behavior to fulfill the expectations of others and to receive their recognition. In terms of family and school connections, if teachers do not interact with parents, they cannot be informed about nor understand the parents' expectations for their children and for the teachers. And, they cannot shape their teaching behavior to be responsive to those expectations. If parents avoid teachers, they cannot be informed about or understand the schools' expectations for their children or for the parents. And, they cannot shape their behavior to provide useful assistance to the students and teachers.

Reference group theory (Merton, 1968) makes other important connections between esteem and interaction. A reference group is a collectivity or an individual who is taken into consideration by another group or individual to influence their attitudes and behaviors. This happens when one group or individual recognizes the importance of the other or admires the positions and actions of the other. For example, if, in planning children's educational program, a teacher considers the part parents can play, it may be because the teacher holds parents as an important reference group. If, in planning their family activities, parents take the teachers' or schools' goals and actions into account, it may be because they consider teachers an important reference group. Sometimes only the higher status group influences the behavior the other, in an unreciprocated pattern. Teachers may take parents into account without parents reciprocating the consideration, as in some communities where parents are in strong control over educational politics and policies. Or, parents may consider teachers an important reference group without the teachers reciprocating, as when parents try to help their children on schoolwork even if the teacher has not given them encouragement or ideas about how to help at home.

The three main theories explain the basic differences in philosophies and approaches of teachers and parents that produce more or fewer, shallow or deep family-school

connections. The supplementary theories explain the motivations to remove or reinforce boundaries between schools and families.

1.2 Understanding the Contrasting Theories: Changing Patterns in Family-School Relations

Historically, there have been important changes in the patterns of partnerships between the home and school. In the early 19th century, parents and the community greatly controlled the actions of the schools. The home, church, and school supported the same goals for learning and for the integration of the student into the adult community (Prentice and Houston, 1975). The community, including parents and church representatives, hired and fired the teachers, determined the school calendar, and influenced the curriculum. When the students were not in school, the families and others in the community taught their children important skills and knowledge needed for success in adulthood.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, a different pattern of family and school relations emerged. Increasingly, the school began to distance itself from the home by emphasizing the teachers' special knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy. Teachers began to teach subjects that were not familiar to parents, using methods and approaches that were not part of the parents' experiences. The family was asked to teach children good behavior and attitudes to prepare children for school, and to take responsibility for teaching children about their ethnicity, religion, and family origins. These family responsibilities were separate from the schools' goal to teach a common curriculum to children from all ethnic, religious, social, and economic groups.

Over the past two decades, family-school relations have changed again in response to increased demands from the public for better, more accountable schools. Both better-educated parents and less-educated parents want a good education for their children and are requesting or requiring schools to keep them informed about and involved in their children's education.

2 An Integrated Theory of Family-School Relations

Changing times require changing theories. School and family relationships have been different at different times in history. It is not surprising, then, to see a restructuring of theories from inter-institutional separation in the 1930s-1950s to cooperation between schools and families in the 1970s-1980s in order to accommodate the social changes affecting these organizations. But we do not yet have a model of family-school relations that accounts for the variation and process of change that will continue to influence the interactions of families and schools. The existing theories omit attention to history, student development, and the influence families and schools have on each other.

A life-course perspective (Elder, 1984) enables us to integrate useful strands from the different theories of family and school relations to correct the weaknesses of the separate theories. A life-course perspective requires that we pay attention to three characteristics in family-school relationships - history, developmental patterns, and change.

2.1 History

Four recent trends help to explain why changes are needed in our theories of family and school relations:

1. More mothers with college education and bachelor's degrees. Over the past 40 years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of U.S. high school students, especially women, who attend and graduate from college. Whereas fewer than 20 percent of bachelor's degrees were earned by women prior to 1950 (mostly in the field of education), fully half of the earned bachelor's degrees were awarded to women in 1980 in many fields (Bureau of the Census, 1984). The education of mothers affects their interactions with teachers. Whereas most mothers were once less educated than the college-trained teachers, most mothers are now attending some college and have near, equal, or higher status than their children's teachers. There is still great variation in the education of women, but the proportion of educated mothers has made a difference in how parents view teachers, how teachers view parents, and whether and how mothers become involved in their children's education.
2. "Baby and Child Care". Dr. Spock's (1950) influential and popular book increased the number of parents who became knowledgeable and involved in the education of their infants and toddlers. The book offers sensible information to all parents about the importance of home environments for children's learning - information that had previously been known to a small proportion of parents. Although Spock's book is not very useful in its discussions of older children and has little to say about school, it has increased parents' awareness of and experience with their children as young learners. Spock's book, other child care books, and private and public health care programs continue to prime new generations of parents of infants and toddlers for the next phase of their children's lives - school.
3. Federal regulations and funding for parent involvement. In the 1960s, Headstart and other federally sponsored programs for disadvantaged preschoolers recognized that parents needed the help of educators to prepare their preschool children for regular school to break the cycle of school failure that threatened their children. More importantly, the preschools recognized that, despite the lack of advanced education of many mothers, the schools and the children needed the mothers' involvement in order to be successful. Mothers of children in Headstart often became involved on advisory councils, in classrooms as volunteers and paid aides, and at home as tutors.

In the same decade, Follow-Through programs required schools to recognize the continued importance of parents as educators beyond the preschool years (Gordon, Olmsted, Rubin, and True, 1979). And, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-172) of 1975 brought teachers and parents together to discuss the educational program of each child. The federal programs and their official recognition of the importance of parents put parent involvement on the agendas of the local schools (Hobson, 1979; Keesling and Melaragno, 1983; Valentine and Stark, 1979). Schools could not easily limit parent involvement to the parents of children in federally sponsored programs and so more parents at all grade levels, regardless of education or economic background, became involved with their children's schools and teachers.

4. Changing family structures. In the past decade, two key changes in family structure have dramatically affected family and school relations. These are the increases in the number of single parents and in the number of mothers working outside the home. Mothers who work outside the home need to manage the care and schooling of their children with more exactitude than mothers who work at home. They must arrange for their children's care before and after school, on school holidays, or during illness. Attention to the needs of the children has increased the concern of working mothers about the quality of day care, school, and after-school programs.

Single mothers are even more likely than other mothers to work outside the home and are especially sensitive about their responsibilities to their children. They have accentuated the need of all parents for information from teachers to help them use their limited time at home more productively in the interest of their children. Although working mothers and single parents do not volunteer to help at the school building as much as other mothers, research shows that they are just as interested as other mothers in their children's education and spend as much or more time helping their children at home (Epstein, 1984).

Increasingly, schools have had to replace traditional images of family life and patterns of communication with mothers at home with new images and new patterns of communication to accommodate different types of families. Some schools have made these adjustments to help all families, however structured, to interact successfully with the schools. Other schools have not changed their expectations for or communications with families, despite the changes in families.

These four trends have over the past four to five decades changed family-school connections in the United States. The events, singly and in combination, involved more parents in their children's education beyond preschool, officially and publicly recognized parents as "teachers", and increased the need for better communications between the home and school.

2.2 Developmental patterns

Schools' and families' interactions need to fit the age, grade level, and level of social and cognitive development of the children. Schools are more like families for young students, with closer ties between teachers and parents of preschool and early elementary students. Schools may become increasingly impersonal in the secondary grades, with the aim of preparing students for interactions in adulthood with other formal organizations in government, in work, in society. But *through high school*, schools vary in the extent they communicate with, inform, and involve parents in their children's education. We do not know the type, degree, or optimal mix of personal vs. impersonal relations across the grades that lead to maximum learning and successful preparation for adulthood. But our model of family-school relations must be based on a developmental framework to account for *the continuity* of school and family actions and interactions across the school years, and *the changes* in forms and purposes of parent involvement at different student ages and stages of development.

2.3 Change

Families and schools are ever-changing. *Families change* as the members mature, develop new skills, knowledge, contacts, and patterns of social interaction. A family builds a changing, cumulative history of relationships with the school for each child in attendance. Interactions with one school affect the family's knowledge and attitudes in dealing with new schools that their children enter.

Schools change as the members come and go. New students enter the school each year; new combinations of students enter classes; and new teachers and administrators join the staff. The talents, perspectives, and leadership of the school change with the maturity and stability of the staff. As teachers and administrators gain experience, advanced training, and security, they increase their abilities to consider complex educational issues, practices, and goals. They may be more open to parents' requests and to parental involvement. Schools can build a changing, cumulative history of relationships with families as the students proceed through the grades.

3. A Model of Overlapping Family and School Spheres

Figure 1 introduces a model of family and school relations that accounts for history, development, and the changing experiences of parents, teachers, and students.

3.1 External Structure

The external structure of the model consists of overlapping or non-overlapping spheres representing the family and school environments. The degree of overlap is controlled by three forces labeled time, experience in families, and experience in schools.

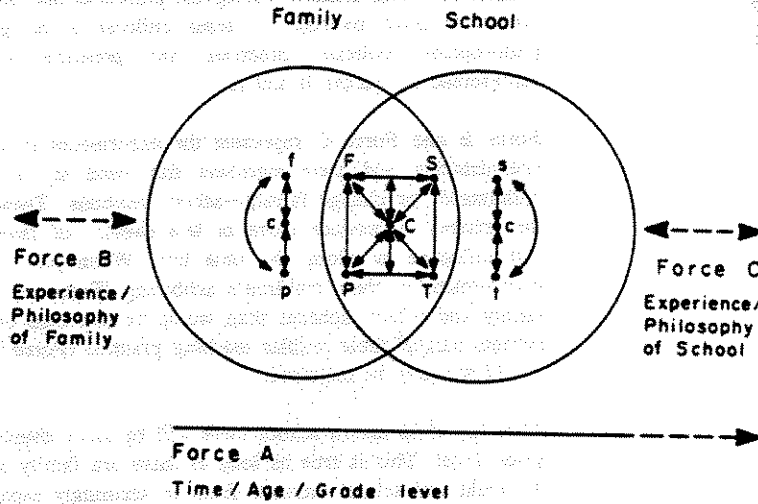


Fig. 1: Model of overlapping spheres of influence of families and schools

Key: Intrainstitutional interactions (lower case)
Interinstitutional interactions (upper case)

- f/F = Family
- s/S = School
- c/C = Child
- p/P = Parent
- t/T = Teacher

Force A represents a developmental time and history line for students, families, and schools. Time refers to individual and historic time — the age and grade level of the child and the social conditions of the period during which the child is in school. For example, in infancy the spheres in our model may be separate. The child first "attends" home, and the family provides the main educating environment. Parents and teachers do not initially interact directly about the child's learning. Even in infancy, however, the spheres may overlap. For example, if an infant is physically, mentally, or emotionally handicapped, parents and special teachers may begin a highly organized cooperative program to benefit the child. For all children, the family and school spheres may overlap to some extent in infancy and early childhood, as parents apply knowledge of child rearing and school readiness from books, their own school experiences, and information

from pediatricians, educators, and others. Later, in a regular pattern, the spheres overlap when the child "attends" home and school.

There will be a "typical" or expected pattern of separation or overlap at different times based on the age of the child, the level of school, and the historic period when the child is in school. Up to now, there has always been the most overlap of family and school spheres for most children during the preschool and early elementary grades. But there has also been great overlap for some children at all grade levels because of the varying philosophies, policies, practices, and pressures of parents, teachers, or both, as represented by Forces B and C.

Force B and Force C represent the experiences of and pressures on family and school organizations and their members that need to be accounted for in order to study, understand, or change family-school relations. These forces push together or pull apart the spheres to produce more or less overlap of family and school actions, interactions, and influence all along the time line. When parents maintain or increase interest and involvement in their children's schooling (Force B), they create greater overlap of the family and school spheres than would be expected on the average. When teachers make parents part of their regular teaching practice (Force C), they create greater overlap than would typically be expected.

After the child enters school there will be some overlap of the two organizations at every grade level. This is true as long as there are family members (or surrogates) with whom the child and school interact. Even in seemingly separate situations such as private, elite boarding schools or state boarding schools for delinquent youngsters there are family and school contacts about contracts, payments, rules, visits, evaluations, and so on, that define the "minimum" overlap of the two spheres over the school years. The "maximum" overlap occurs when schools and families operate as true "partners" with frequent cooperative efforts and clear, close communications between parents and teachers in a comprehensive program of many important types of parent involvement (Epstein, 1986; Gordon, 1979; Seeley, 1981). But there is never "total" overlap because the family maintains some functions and practices that are independent of the schools' or teachers' programs, and the school maintains some functions and practices that are independent of families.

Children are connected to the same families but different teachers over their school years. Each new teacher (Force C) and each family's continuing or new patterns of involvement (Force B) create a dynamic pattern of family-school relationships. There is continual adjustment in the overlap or separation of the two spheres.

Time alone (Force A) or the increasing age of the child, does not make parents more knowledgeable about how to help their children with particular school problems. Indeed, our research shows that it currently works the other way. The older the child (after grade 1), the less overlap in the two environments, and the less the parent feels able to help the

child in school (Epstein, 1986). Thus, in Figure 1, if we included only Force A, we would see for most families and schools, quite separate spheres in infancy, increasing overlap during the preschool years and grade 1, and decreasing overlap from grades 2 or 3 on.

By adding Forces B and C we recognize that the parents' and teachers' practices and the pressures they put on each other alter the typical patterns to create more or less overlap for families and schools at every grade level. For example, some teachers of older students increase their interactions with the parents of their upper elementary and secondary school students in order to keep the families involved in their children's education. For children in these teachers' classes, there will be greater overlap of family and school goals and interactions than for children whose teachers ignore the role of parents in their teaching practice.

3.2 Internal Structure

The internal structure of the model in Figure 1 shows the interpersonal relationships and influence patterns of primary importance. Two types of interactions and influence are shown — within organization (lower case letters) and between organizations (upper case letters). Two levels of interaction are shown — standard, organizational communications (family and school) and specific, individual communications (parent and teacher). Family (f) and school (s), and parent (p) and teacher (t) interactions are those that occur separately as parents, offspring, or other relatives conduct their family life and personal relationships, or as teachers, principals, and other school staff create school policies, or conduct school or individual activities. Family (F) and School (S), and Parent (P) and Teacher (T) interactions are those that occur as members of the two organizations interact in standard, organizationally-directed communications (F and S), or in unique, individually-directed communications (P and T).

Family (F) and School (S) connections refer to the interactions between family members and school staff that concern all families and the general school staff or school programs. These include, for example, communications to all parents about school policies, workshops available to all parents on child rearing or child development, programs for all parents to become involved at the school as parent volunteers, or family actions that may affect the schools such as activities of parent-teacher organizations, parent advisory councils, or citizen advocacy groups in the community. These types of involvement establish common structures for communications and interactions between families and schools as organizations.

Parent (P) and Teacher (T) connections refer to specific interactions between parents and teachers about an individual child. These may include, for example, parent-teacher conferences about the child's progress, parents' notes or phone calls to teachers about the child's academic, social, or personal problems or needs, or the teacher's specific

suggestions to parents about how they can help their own child with learning activities at home.

The child (C) has the central place in all of the patterns of interaction and influence in this model. We assume that the child's welfare and interests are the parents' and teachers' reasons for interacting. For the child, the school and family policies, parent and teacher interactions, and the child's understanding and reactions to these connections, influence academic learning and social development. The multi-directional arrows in the model show that children interact with, influence, and are influenced by their families and especially parents, and by changes in their families and parental behavior that result from the actions of the schools. Children interact with, influence, and are influenced by their schools and especially teachers, and by the changes in schools' and teachers' practices that result from the actions of families.

The external and internal structures of the model are, of course, intimately related. The internal organizational and individual relationships are influenced simultaneously by the age and grade level of the student and by the common practices of time period (Force A) and by the actions, attitudes, experiences, and decisions of teachers and parents (Forces B and C). The degree of overlap of family and school organizations and their goals and practices affect the social and psychological distance between the family and school members, their patterns of communication, and the results or outcomes of more or less interaction. Each of the components of the model can be translated into well-specified measures to study the effects of parent involvement (e.g., teachers' practices of parent involvement, parents' initiatives or responses to teachers' requests) on student achievement, attitudes, and other student, parent and teacher outcomes.

The model recognizes the interlocking histories of the institutions and the individuals in each, and the continuing, causal connections between organizations and individuals. Our model energizes an integrated theory of family and school relations by acknowledging the continuous change that occurs in families and schools, the accumulated knowledge and experiences of parents, teachers, and students, and influence of these different patterns on student motivations, attitudes, and achievement.

4. School-like Families and Family-like Schools

The proposed model of overlapping spheres assumes that there are mutual interests and influences of families and schools that can be more or less successfully promoted by the policies and programs of the organizations and the actions and attitudes of the individuals in those organizations. Although there are important differences between schools and families (Dreeben, 1968), we need to recognize also the important similarities, overlap in goals, responsibilities, and mutual influence of the two major environments which simultaneously affect children's learning and development.

Earlier theories asserted that schools treat students equally, judging them by universal standards, and rewarding students for what they do (achievements) and not for who they are (ascriptions). In contrast, families are said to treat children individually, judging them by personal standards and special relationships, basing rewards and affection on the children's individual growth and improvement or on their membership in the family, and not on achievements relative to other children. These "pure" images of different institutional approaches and functions are not very accurate portrayals of how schools or families actually work to motivate students toward success in school. The distinction between universalistic and particularistic treatments has been blurred in families that are more aware of the importance of schooling and its components and in schools with more personal and individualized environments. We call these *school-like families* and *family-like schools*.

4.1 School - like Families

Some parents run "school-like" homes. They know how to help their children in schoolwork and take appropriate opportunities to do so. The school-like families often have persistent and consistent academic schedules of learning for their children from infancy on, with books and colors, shapes and sizes, and music and art as part of their early "school-like" curricula. Before the children enter school, these families are directed by "absentee" or remembered teachers, or by contemporary educational sources and resources. We say that during the early years the family teaches the young child, but in fact it may be that *images of school or teachers in absentia* influence the family in how and what to teach the child.

Some families operate very much like schools. They not only create school-like tasks for their children and reward them for success, but also match tasks to the child's level of ability and involve the children in active learning and not passive listening. These families not only translate the curriculum of the school into home tasks, but also put into practice principles of organizational effectiveness (Rich and Jones, 1977) and use the same structures (i.e., the task, authority, reward, grouping, evaluation, and time or TARGET structures) that guide effective classroom instruction (Epstein, in press b, c).

Although most parents accept and love their children for their unique qualities and lineal connections, many families reward their children for real and objective accomplishments, as teachers do. Many families judge their children on standard criteria and reward their children as they learn the "basic skills" (from learning to walk to learning to read) and as they acquire social skills and advanced academic skills or other talents. School-like families place more emphasis than other families on their children's place in a status hierarchy.

4.2 Family-like Schools

Teachers vary in their recognition and use of the overlap in family and school spheres of influence. Some schools make their students feel part of a "school family" that looks out for their interests and provides unique experiences for each child. Schools may relax and destandardize their rules, vary the students' roles, and alter the reward system to be more responsive to the student and to be more like families.

Although schools impose some uniform standards on all students (e.g., attendance regulations, graduation requirements, formal codes for dress or conduct), these may not be as important as student-teacher relationships and personal, individual attention for influencing and improving student motivation and progress. Presently, brighter students often are given various opportunities to interact on friendly and preferential terms with teachers. Slower students often experience less personal, less family-like treatment, which may further reduce their motivation to come to school to learn.

Schools vary in how much they emphasize uniform or special standards. Some schools recognize and reward only students who are in the top groups or tracks, or who get the highest grades. Other schools reward students for individual progress and improvement in achievement, as parents do. They place less emphasis on the students' place in a status hierarchy. Particularistic treatment, associated with family relations, implies a degree of favoritism or special attention to the unique and endearing qualities of individuals. This kind of treatment occurs at some schools, too, with some students receiving family-like treatment, attention, and affection from teachers.

4.3 Time in Family and School Environments

The child is either in school or out. Some count the hours that students spend in school (e.g., *Fifteen thousand hours*, by Rutter and associates, 1979). Others cite the time that students are *not* in school and are under the influence of the family, community, media, churches, camps, day-care programs, peer groups, or part-time employers (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984). At least 16 hours per school day plus weekends and vacations are out-of-school time. The seemingly clear dichotomy of time in or out of school is obscured by the degree of overlap in the two environments. For example, when the student is *in school*, the *family's influence* may still be at work. A student knows, if a parent knows what is happening in school, what the student is learning, and how he/she is expected to behave. Homework activities may affect the student's attention in class and readiness for new and more difficult work. Similarly, when the student is *at home*, the *school's influence* may be still at work. At home, a student may consider how a teacher wants homework to be completed and may use school skills and information to discuss ideas and solve problems.

Time in and out of school, then, is not "pure" school or family time. Time in school may be influenced by the family; time out of school may be influenced by teachers and other school programs and experiences. The degree of overlap in the two environments on matters of schoolwork and on the recognition and support of students' unique, individual talents influences the students' attention, motivation, and learning in and out of school.

5. Exploring the Theory: Effects of Family—School Overlap on Parents, Students, and Teaching Practice

From research completed over the past several years, we have some evidence on how teachers' practices reflect the three current theories of family and school relations, and how the degree of overlap in family and school spheres influences parents' attitudes and behaviors and student attitudes and achievements.

5.1 Variation in Overlap in Teaching Practice

The philosophies and practices of teachers reflect the three theories of school and family relations — separate, shared, and sequential spheres of family and school responsibilities and influence. For example, some teachers believe that they can be effective only if they obtain parental cooperation and assistance on learning activities at home. In their classrooms, cooperation is high. These teachers make frequent requests for parental assistance in reinforcing or improving students' skills. They orchestrate actions to increase the overlap in family and school spheres of influence.

Other teachers believe that their professional status is in jeopardy, if parents are involved in activities that are typically the teachers' responsibilities. In their classrooms, inter-institutional cooperation is low. These teachers make few overtures to parents and rarely request them to help their children on learning activities at home. They maintain more separate spheres of influence for the school and the family (Becker and Epstein, 1982; Epstein and Becker, 1982).

Teachers' present practices also illustrate assumptions of sequential patterns in family—school relations. More teachers of young children (grade 1) than older children (grades 3 and 5) are frequent users of parent involvement techniques. In a clear, linear pattern, most teachers of young children assist parents to become involved in their children's education, but most teachers of older children ignore or discourage parental involvement. Along the time line, then, there is increasingly less overlap of family and school spheres.

5.2 Benefits from Greater Overlap

Our surveys of teachers, principals, parents, and students show that:

- Teachers control the flow of information to parents. By limiting or reducing communications and collaborative activities, teachers reinforce the boundaries that separate the two institutions. By increasing communications, teachers acknowledge and build connections between institutions to focus on the common concerns of teachers and parents — a child who is also a student (Becker and Epstein, 1982).
- Parents do not report deep conflict or incompatibility between the schools and families. Rather, parents of children at all grade levels respond favorably to teachers' practices that stress the cooperation and overlap of schools and families. Frequent use by teachers of parent involvement leads parents to report that they receive *more ideas* about how to help their children at home, and that they *know more* about the instructional programs than they did the previous year (Epstein, 1986).
- Teachers who include the family in the children's education are recognized by parents for their efforts. They are *rated higher* by parents than other teachers on interpersonal and teaching skills, and they are rated higher in overall teaching ability by their principals (Epstein, 1985, 1986).
- Students' test scores suggest that schools are more effective when families and schools work together with the student on basic skills. Students whose teachers use frequent practices of parent involvement gain more than other students in reading skills from fall to spring (Epstein, in press a). And fifth grade students recognize and benefit from cooperation between their teachers and parents (Epstein, 1982).

The results of our research show that although teaching practice reflects all three of the major theoretical positions — separate, shared, and sequenced responsibilities of schools and homes — parents, students, and teachers benefit most from practices that increase the overlap in school and family spheres of influence all along the developmental time line.

6. Conclusion

Over the past few decades, ideas about family-school relations have changed as other social conditions affected schools and families. The theories have moved away from the separation of family and school and toward greater teacher-parent cooperation and communication. Our model of family-school relations integrates the discrete, extant theories and reflects the fact that at any time, in any school, and in any family, parent involvement is a variable that can be increased or decreased by the practices of teachers, administrators, parents, and students. Programs and practices can be designed, revised, and evaluated to learn which variations produce greater school and family effectiveness and student success. The members of the school and family organizations can act and interact with others in ways that include or exclude parents from their children's education and that include or exclude teachers as influences on the family. These actions push the

spheres of family and school influence together or apart in a continuous, dynamic pattern, and influence student learning and development.

Schools and families vary on the dimensions that are supposed to distinguish family and school treatments and attention to children. There are family-like schools and school-like families, as well as schools and families that are distinct in their approaches to education and socialization. Some have suggested that schools and families have different goals for their children (Lightfoot, 1978). But our research suggests that although parents' educational backgrounds differ, more- and less-educated parents have similar goals as the school for their children's education (Epstein, 1986).

The main differences among parents are: their knowledge of how to help their children at home; their beliefs that the teachers want them to assist their children at home; and the degree of information and guidance from their children's teachers in how to help their children at home. These factors create more or less school-like families.

The main differences among teachers are: their ability to put principles of child and adolescent development and organizational effectiveness into practice in instruction and classroom management; their ability to communicate with students as individuals; their beliefs about the importance of parents' involvement and about parents' receptivity to guidance from the school; and their ability to communicate with parents as partners in the children's education. These factors create more or less family-like schools.

Our theoretical model, its underlying assumptions, and research on the effects on parents and students of teachers' practices of parent involvement aim to:

1. *Extend studies of families* by intensifying attention to the interplay of family and school environments during that part of the parents' and children's lives when the children are in school or are preparing for school, from infancy through the high school grades.
2. *Extend studies of school organization and effects* by intensifying attention to the total educational environment of children including the home, and by examining the implications of this extension for teachers' roles and student learning and development.

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A report from the

SCHOOL, FAMILY & COMMUNITY
PARTNERSHIPS PROJECT

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS & CHILDREN'S LEARNING

The Effects of School, Family and Community Support on the Academic Achievement of African American Adolescents

by

Mavis G. Sanders

ABSTRACT

This study explores the effects of teacher, family and church support on the school-related attitudes, behaviors and academic achievement of African-American, urban adolescents. To achieve this objective, 827 students in an urban school district in the southeastern United States were surveyed. Interviews were conducted with a subset of the research population to enhance and aid in the interpretation of the questionnaire data. The analyses show that students' perceptions of teacher and parental academic support, and church involvement indirectly influence achievement through their positive and significant influence on students' academic self-concept and school behavior. Implications for practice and further research are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The school performance of African American youth remains a pressing issue in education. High dropout rates (Rumberger 1987; U.S. Department of Education 1991), poor grades and low test scores (Humphreys 1988) among members of this population, especially those in urban school districts, underscore the importance of continued research on factors influencing school outcomes for these youth. Accordingly, the present study seeks to determine if and how support from institutions responsible for the care and socialization of African-American, urban youth influences their school-related attitudes, behaviors and academic achievement. A clear understanding of how these institutions influence achievement will increase our knowledge of how they might best work collectively to ensure the success of these youth.^{1 2}

Theoretical Model: Overlapping Spheres of Influence

The relationship between schools, families and communities has been viewed from a variety of perspectives (see Parsons 1959; Bronfenbrenner 1979). The framework used here, overlapping spheres of influence, is one developed nearly a decade ago by Epstein (1987). This

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theory integrates a wealth of educational, sociological and psychological perspectives on social organizations, as well as research on the effects of family, school and community environments on educational outcomes (for a detailed discussion, see Epstein 1987, 1992). Acknowledging the "interlocking histories of the major institutions that socialize and educate children," (Epstein 1992, pp. 1140-41) a central principle of this theory is that certain goals, such as student academic success, are of mutual interest to each of these institutions and are best achieved through their cooperative action and support. Pictorially, this perspective is represented by three spheres symbolizing school, family and community, whose relative relationship is determined by the attitudes and practices of individuals within each context (Epstein 1992).

Based upon years of research, Epstein (1995) has identified six types of school-family-community involvement important to student learning and development. These are: 1) parenting - helping all families establish home environments that support children as students; 2) communicating - designing and conducting effective forms of communication about school programs and children's progress; 3) volunteering - recruiting and organizing help and support for school functions and activities; 4) learning at home - providing information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with school work and related activities; 5) decision-making - including parents in school decisions, and 6) collaborating with the community - identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen and support schools, students and their families (for a more detailed discussion, see Epstein 1995). Different practices can be implemented to foster each of the six types of involvement. The objective, however, is for schools, families, and their surrounding communities to aid each other in rearing healthy, successful children.

This study draws upon Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence to examine factors affecting the academic achievement of African-American, urban adolescents. It does so by identifying common areas of influence of three institutions of socialization -- the school, the family and the church.

School, Family and Church as Overlapping Spheres

Previous research has established the importance of family support for student achievement (Kifer, 1977; Coleman 1987; Clark 1983; Durkin 1984; Walberg 1984; Lee 1984). According to Coleman (1987) “. . . [S]chools, of whatever quality are more effective for children from strong family backgrounds than for children from weak ones” because strong families provide their children with the social capital necessary for school success (p.35). The importance of teacher support for students' school success has also been established in the research literature (Irvine 1990; Sizemore 1981; Holliday 1985; Shade 1982). Irvine (1990) argues that teachers play a central role in the school performance of this nation's children because the relationship between a teacher and a student “rivals the relationship between a parent and a child” (p.47). Research suggests that the teacher-student relationship is especially important for the academic success of African American and other minority students (Sizemore, 1981; Holliday 1985). Further, there is a growing body of literature showing a link between church involvement, and academic achievement and attainment for African-Americans (Blau 1981; Brown and Gary 1991; Freeman 1986). The studies cited above have successfully identified key practices that teachers, parents and institutions, such as the black church, can and do employ to promote positive educational outcomes for African American youth.

The present study builds upon and extends this research by examining how these institutions affect student achievement. Specifically, this study examines the effects of support from these institutions on three attitudinal and behavioral variables that have a significant influence on academic achievement and engagement. These are academic self-concept, achievement ideology and school behavior.

Although most researchers agree that the relationship between academic self-concept and achievement is at least partially reciprocal, studies have attempted to determine the predominant direction of causality between these variables (Shavelson and Bolus 1982; Frerichs 1970; Brookover et. al., 1965). Central to this effort is the longitudinal study conducted by Shavelson and Bolus (1982), in which they analyzed the relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement for seventh and eighth grade students. They found that self-concept of ability influenced later graders, whereas grades had relatively little influence on later academic self-concept measures.

Students' achievement ideology or belief about the relationship between schooling and future success and prosperity also has been found to influence academic performance (Brookover and Scheider, 1975; Mickelson 1990; Ford 1992; Polite 1992). If youth view education as an effective means of social and economic improvement, they are more likely to value educational attainment and academic achievement. On the other hand, if they are pessimistic about the role of education for socioeconomic mobility, they are less likely to value academic achievement. Indeed, in an analysis of fifth-grade attitudes, Brookover and Schneider (1975) found that students' sense of futility in the school system accounted for nearly 45% of the remaining variance in academic achievement after controlling for student background variables.

Lastly, a number of researchers (Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore 1982; Purkey and Smith 1983; Diprete 1981, and Baker 1985) have argued a causal path from school behavior to school performance. They contend that non-disruptive behavior is a prerequisite for learning, and thus, students who attend class and behave in prescribed ways are more likely to achieve academic success than those who do not. This study tests whether academic self-concept, achievement ideology, and school behavior mediate or explain the relationship between school, family and community support and academic achievement. The model tested in the study is illustrated in Figure 1.

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

DATA METHODS

Setting

The study was conducted in a southeastern city with a population of approximately 300,000. The city's public school district comprises 81 schools, which serve approximately 42,000 students enrolled in grades K-12; nineteen are middle schools serving grades six through eight. Ninety percent of the student population is minority, predominantly African-American. The racial composition of the student population is similar to that of a number of urban school districts in major southeastern cities. For example, the school districts of New Orleans, Louisiana; Jackson, Mississippi; Memphis, Tennessee, and Richmond, Virginia have student populations that are over 80 percent African-American (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). In these school districts and the district in which the study was conducted, 25 percent or more of the

enrolled students are from families living below poverty level (MDR's School Directory 1994-5).

Sample

The study's population consisted of eight hundred twenty-seven African-American, eighth-grade students attending eight of nineteen middle schools in the district. The schools were selected based on their size and geographic location to ensure that students throughout the district were represented in the sample. Permission slips for student participation were provided to all eighth-graders at each of the selected middle schools. Although participation levels varied at each school, the overall student response rate of 67% provided a diverse population, differing on key background variables as described below.

Eighth-grade students were selected for the study because early adolescence is a pivotal time for school achievement. According to a number of authors (Elmen 1991; Kramer 1991; Lipsitz 1981), early adolescence is a vulnerable period when students begin to make choices that will affect their future educational and career plans. Several researchers have found that for many early adolescents, there is a gradual decline in various indicators of academic motivation, behavior, and self-perception leading to lower academic achievement and increased rates of school dropout (see Eccles and Midgley 1988). Additional research is needed to promote greater understanding of the factors that affect student achievement during this critical period in a child's psychological and physical development, especially research that focuses on African-American adolescents.

Measures

Instrument. Students participating in the study completed a five-point, Likert-type questionnaire administered by the author between October and January of 1993-94. Students were not required to write their names on the questionnaires that took, on average, thirty minutes to complete. The variables measured by the survey are described below.

Teacher support. Students' perceptions of teachers' encouragement of academic endeavors and achievement were measured using items from the teacher support scale developed by Eggert, Herting and Thompson (1991). Items in the scale ($\alpha = .82$) were: a) My teachers do not treat me fairly (reverse code); b) My teachers help other students more than they help me (reverse code); c) My teachers don't care if I fail or succeed (reverse code); d) When I need help with my schoolwork, I feel comfortable asking my teachers; e) My teachers try to help me do well in school; f) My teachers really try to help me understand the lesson. Response categories ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The items of the scale were averaged for a mean score.

Parental support. Students' perceptions of parents' encouragement of academic endeavors and achievement were measured using items from the parental support scale developed by Eggert, Herting and Thompson (1991). Items in the scale ($\alpha = .76$) were: a) My parents make sure that I do my homework; b) My parents make sure that I go to school every day; c) If I didn't do well in school, my parents would try to help me; d) My parents always study my report card carefully; e) My parents praise me when I do well in school. The response format for the scale ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The items of the scale were averaged for a mean score.

Church Involvement - Students' levels of participation in church and related activities were measured by a scale developed by the author. Items in the scale ($\alpha = .73$) were: a) I attend church service frequently; b) Members of my church know me well; c) I am a member of at least one church group. Response categories ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The items of the scale were averaged for a mean score.

Achievement Ideology - Students' perceptions of the importance of schooling and academic achievement to future success were measured by a scale developed by the author, and informed by Mickelson's Attitude Scale (see Mickelson 1990). Items in the scale ($\alpha = .71$) were: a) School will help me get a good job when I am older; b) I work hard in school now because I know that it will help me get a good job later; c) School will not help me get a good job when I am older (reverse code); d) I don't think that doing well in school will help me to improve my life (reverse code); e) I need a good education to get a good job; f) I think that doing well in school is important for my future. Response categories ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The items of the scale were averaged for a mean score.

Academic Self-Concept - Students' perceptions of their ability to learn and succeed in school were measured by a modified version of the Brookover Self-Concept of School Ability Scale (Brookover, Paterson and Thomas 1962). The items in the scale ($\alpha = .74$) were: a) How do you rate yourself in school ability compared with those in your class at school? b) Where do you think you would rank in your class in high school? c) Do you think you have the ability to complete college? d) Where do you think you would rank in your class in college? e) Forget for a moment how others grade your work. In your own opinion, how good do you think that your work is? f) What kind of grades do you think you are capable of getting?

Response categories for items a, b and d ranged from among the poorest (1) to among the best (5); item c ranged from no, I know that I don't (1) to yes, I am sure that I do (5); item e ranged from my work is much below average (1) to my work is excellent (5), and item f ranged from mostly Fs (1) to mostly As (5). The items of the scale were averaged for a mean score.

School Behavior - Students' conduct in school was measured by a scale developed by the author. Items in the scale ($\alpha = .83$) were: a) I get into fights (not arguments) with other students; b) I break school rules; c) I get sent from the classroom for misbehaving; d) I get sent to the principal for misbehaving; e) My parents have to come to the school because of my behavior. The response format ranged from very often (1) to never (5). The items of the scale were averaged for a mean score, with a high score indicating good behavior.

Academic Achievement - A mean score of students' self-reported grades in social studies, science, English and mathematics was used as the measure of academic achievement. That is, the letter grade reported by students for each of the above academic subjects was converted to a number based on a four point scale, and an academic grade point average was calculated.

Background Variables

The instrument also contained items to measure several background variables -- poverty level, family structure, sex and age. Students participating in the free or reduced lunch program ($n=532$) were identified as living at or below poverty level, while students not receiving free or reduced lunches ($n=288$) were identified as living above poverty level. A dummy variable (income) was created; students living at or below poverty level were coded as one (1), and students living above poverty level were coded as zero (0). Although this measure offers a limited range of variance, it does avoid the error in student reports of parent education

and occupation. It also permits an examination of the effects of poverty on the educational experience of African-American, urban youth.

In addition, students reported on their household structure. Forty-eight percent of students reported living in single parent households (n=392), almost all with their mothers; 44 percent reported living with two parents (n=360), and 9 percent reported living with relatives serving as legal guardians (n=71). A dummy variable (npar) was created to represent family structure with single-parent households coded as one (1), and all others as zero (0).

A dummy variable for students' sex was also created; male students (n=378) were coded as zero and females (n=443) as one. Lastly, students reported their ages, which ranged from 12 to 17. Approximately 1 percent of the students were 12 (n=10); the majority -- 60 percent -- were 13 (n=494); an additional 29 percent were 14 (n=240), approximately 9 percent were 15 (n=72), and nine students, 1 percent of the sample, were 16 or 17. Of the students reporting ages 15 years or older, the majority (68%) were males. Given that all participants were eighth graders, age, in this analysis, serves as a proxy measure of student retention.

Interviews. After the administration of the questionnaire, 40 students (male-16, female-24) were selected for in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The face-to-face interviews lasted, on average, one hour each and were conducted between October 1993 and January of 1994 by the author. These interviews covered a variety of topics, such as beliefs about schooling, activities in and out of school, future educational and employment plans, and relationships with teachers and family. Students who were interviewed for the study were selected by school counselors and teachers as "representative" of students at varying achievement and school engagement levels.

The selection was verified through student self-reported grades. Interviews were conducted privately and students were assured of anonymity. The interviews supplemented and enriched the surveys and aided in interpreting the quantitative data.

ANALYSIS

The primary purpose of this study is to determine whether support from significant adults influences academic achievement among African American eighth grade students through its effects on students' school related attitudes and behaviors (see Figure 1). To achieve the study's purpose, multiple regression analysis was used. The initial set of equations model student perceptions of teacher and parental support, along with church involvement on three attitudinal and behavioral variables: academic self-concept, achievement ideology and school behavior. Statistical controls on student background characteristics -- age, sex, poverty level, and number of parents in household -- are included in these equations. The final equations build on the initial set by modeling the effects of student perceptions of support from the family, church and school, together with students' school-related attitudes and behaviors, and background variables, as predictors of academic achievement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Data

The means, standard deviations and score ranges for the support variables, attitudinal and behavioral variables, and academic achievement are shown in Table 1.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

Table 2 shows the zero order correlations for key variables in the study. The attitudinal/behavioral variables — school behavior, academic self-concept and achievement ideology — are positively and significantly correlated with each of the support variables and academic achievement. Being female is also significantly and positively correlated with school behavior, academic self-concept and achievement ideology. Conversely, the attitudinal/behavioral variables are negatively correlated with age, poverty and living in a single parent household. To learn more about the relationships shown in Table 2, a series of regression equations were tested.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

Table 3 shows the regression model predicting school behavior. Equation 1 shows the effects of the background variables on students' conduct at school. The statistical controls reveal no real surprises; males, students living below poverty level, and older students who have been retained struggle most with behavioral issues. Living in a single-parent household has a negative but non-significant effect on student school behavior. Equation 2 shows the effects of the support variables on students' reported conduct. Teacher support ($\beta=.27, p<.001$) and parental support ($\beta=.09, p<.01$) positively and significantly influence student school conduct. These findings suggest that students are better behaved in school when they perceive responsiveness and concern from teachers and encouragement to do well in school from parents. The support variables have

a meaningful impact on the variance explained by the model. When they are included in the regression equation, the R square increases from .14 to .24.

(Insert Table 3 about here)

A similar pattern is evident in Table 4, which shows the regression model predicting academic self concept. Neither being female or living below poverty level is a significant predictor of academic self concept. Older students ($\beta = -.17, p < .001$) and students living in single parent households ($\beta = -.10, p < .01$) report lower academic self-concepts than students at modal grade age and who live in two parent households. However, when the support variables are added to the regression equation, the beta coefficients for age and family structure decrease, and the significance of living in a single parent household is reduced from $p < .01$ to $p < .05$.

Of the support variables examined, parental support ($\beta = .18, p < .001$) and church involvement ($\beta = .16, p < .001$) have moderate and positive effects on student academic self-concept. Teacher support, however, does not have a significant influence on academic self-concept. This finding may indicate that individuals who have consistently been in the child's life before early adolescence have the greatest influence on this variable. Alternatively, it may reflect the content of the teacher support scale. The scale was designed to measure students' perceptions of teacher academic support and accessibility. Perhaps a scale measuring the extent to which teachers not only assist with student learning, but emphasize and reward students for excellence would have yielded positive effects on student academic self-concept. This possibility and the fact that only 11 percent of the variance in academic self-concept is explained

by this model, suggest the need to explore additional individual, school, home and community factors that influence African-American urban adolescents' beliefs about their academic ability.

(Insert Table 4 about here)

The regression model predicting achievement ideology is shown in Table 5. Females are more likely than their male counterparts to believe that a good education is important to their future success, while adolescents living below poverty level and living in single parent households are more likely to question the relationship between education and social and economic progress. The support variables, however, exert a strong influence on students' achievement ideology. Teacher support ($\beta=.20, p<.001$) and more significantly, parental support ($\beta=.31, p<.001$) increase the variance explained by the model from 4% to 20%. Further, the beta coefficients and significance levels for all the background variables are reduced when the support variables are added to the regression model. The findings strongly suggest that when students perceive that their parents and teachers are supportive of school success, their belief in the importance of education increases.

(Insert Table 5 about here)

The results, thus far, indicate that each of the support variables has a significant and positive influence on one or more of the attitudinal/behavioral variables measured. Church involvement is a positive and significant predictor of academic self-concept; teacher support is a

positive and significant predictor of school behavior and achievement ideology, and parental support is a positive and significant predictor of school behavior, academic self concept and achievement ideology. The importance of the support variables on students' attitudes and school behavior is perhaps most dramatically shown by the effect that their addition to the regression models has on the R-square.

In the next stage of the analysis, the background and support variables, along with the attitudinal and behavioral variables are regressed on academic achievement to determine whether students' school related attitudes and behaviors act to mediate the relationship between support from significant adults and academic achievement. This stage of the analysis is carried out in three equations, which are shown in Table 6.

Equation 1 shows the effects of the background variables on academic achievement. Male students report lower grades in their academic subjects than do female students. Older students, students living in single-parent households and students living below poverty level also report receiving lower grades in mathematics, English, social studies and science. Equation 2 shows the effects on academic achievement when the support variables are added to the regression model. Each of the support variables is positively associated with student grades. However, only church involvement ($\beta=.08, p<.05$) and teacher support ($\beta=.10, p<.01$) have direct and significant effects on student academic achievement. In Equation 3, the attitudinal/behavioral variables are added to the regression model to determine if they explain the effects of the support variables on student achievement. Each of the attitudinal/behavioral variables is positively associated with student achievement, and their addition to the regression equation reduces the effects of church involvement, teacher support and living in a single parent household to non significance, while

the directions of the effects remain constant. Further, with the addition of the attitudinal/behavioral variables, the R square is increased from .13 to .29. Academic self-concept ($\beta=.36, p<.001$) has the strongest influence on student academic grade point average. School behavior ($\beta=.13, p<.001$) is also a positive and significant predictor of student achievement.

It is interesting to note that although achievement ideology is positively associated with academic achievement, it is not a significant predictor of student grades ($\beta=.05$). This finding may be best explained by Mickelson's (1990) distinction between abstract and concrete attitudes. According to Mickelson (1990), while abstract attitudes reflect the dominant ideology, concrete attitudes, which are "rooted in life experience" (p.44), inform achievement behavior. If in their households and neighborhoods, African-American adolescents are not exposed to individuals who confirm the possibility of mobility through education, they may possess an abstract belief in the importance of schooling, but not a concrete one that significantly affects academic effort and outcomes.

The effect of the attitudinal/behavioral variables on parental involvement is also interesting to note. When these variables are included in the equation, the beta coefficient for parental support is reduced and the direction is reversed. It appears that beyond its effect on academic self-concept, school behavior and achievement ideology, parental support is negatively associated with grade point average. This negative association is similar to that found in some studies between homework help and academic achievement (Epstein, 1988). In each case, the negative association most probably reflects the additional assistance and support families give to students who are having academic problems.

The analyses shown in Table 6 indicate that much of the effect of church involvement and

parental and teacher support on academic achievement can be explained by their positive and significant influence on students' attitudes and behaviors — specifically, school conduct and perceptions of academic ability. The study, thus, suggests that by providing encouragement and guidance, significant adults in the family, church and school help students to develop the attitudes and behavior necessary for school success.

(Insert Table 6 about here)

Combined Effects. Additional analyses were conducted to determine if the combined, or overlapping effect of church involvement and teacher and parental support on academic self-concept, achievement ideology and school behavior is stronger than the independent effect of each on these attitudinal and behavioral variables. A new variable, *total support*, which is simply a summation of each of the support variables, was constructed. This variable and the background variables of sex, age, poverty status and family structure were included in the regression equations predicting academic self-concept, achievement ideology and school behavior.

The effects of combined support from the family, church and school on student conduct ($\beta=.26, p<.001$) is comparable to the independent effect of teacher support on student conduct. This finding emphasizes the importance of the teacher's role in promoting positive classroom behavior. However, the effects of combined support on academic self-concept ($\beta=.26, p<.001$) and achievement ideology ($\beta=.34, p<.001$), attitudinal variables that are developed and internalized over time, are stronger than the independent effects of support from any of the

institutions -- school, family and church -- alone. This result is most clearly shown in the relationship between total support and academic self concept (see Table 4), the variable found to be most strongly predictive of academic achievement. The results of these analyses suggest that when students receive support from the family, church and school simultaneously, the effects on their attitudes about self and the importance of schooling are magnified.

Qualitative Data

To further clarify the above findings, interview data were analyzed. The excerpts that follow were selected to clarify the primary relationships established by the quantitative data. These are: the effects of church involvement and parental support on academic self-concept, and the effects of parental and teacher support on school behavior. Both academic self-concept and school behavior were found to positively and significantly influence student academic achievement. The interview excerpts also illustrate students' recognition of the importance of family-school-community connections for their well-being and academic success.

Academic Self-Concept. According to the students interviewed, church involvement provides them the opportunity to engage in a number of activities that require school related skills -- such as public speaking, and reading and analyzing texts -- in a supportive, nurturing environment. According to Mark³, a thirteen year-old eighth grader with a 3.5 academic grade point average:

³ All names have been changed to ensure student anonymity.

They [church members] think that I am smart. Others give what are basically 13 year old comments, but after I speak, usually people come and say that they enjoyed my comments, that I sound so much like an older person.

Rick, a thirteen year old with a 3.0 average in his academic courses, also attests to the confidence and support that he receives from members of his church. He explains:

... I am a member of the choir, and I lead devotion. They [church members] think that I am a nice guy. ... Going to church gives me the confidence that I am going to make good grades, because the members always support me in whatever I do.

Similarly, students report that parents influence academic self-concept through their high expectations for performance and their encouragement of continued effort. In this light,

Raymond, who is also thirteen states:

I work pretty hard in school and am doing okay. I made an A, two Bs and one C. My parents help me a lot. They are always telling me that I can do better. . . I think that I can bring up the C next grading period.

Adele's academic self-concept is also strengthened by the support she finds at home.

Adele is fourteen and has a 2.3 grade point average in her academic courses, which she hopes to

improve. When discussing the sources of her academic support, she states:

My neighbors, my mother and my aunt help me a lot with school . . . I know that I can do well. . . . My mom says that if I want to achieve my goals, then I can and I believe her. If I study and everything, I can reach my goals.

Denise, a fourteen year old eighth grader with a 3.8 average illustrates the impact of both family and church support on perceptions of academic ability. She is a confident young woman who enthusiastically talks about the academic support and encouragement she receives from the significant others in her life:

. . . My family is very encouraging. I have always made good grades, except one time in the fourth grade, I made a D in English. Never again will I bring a D to my mom and dad. They were upset. But after that, I never made such a low grade — and I don't bring home Cs because my mom and dad don't like Cs. I try not to make 80s, because they'll say, "That was too close to a C." . . . [And] if you have parents like mine, they talk a lot. They tell any problems that you might have, and they try to help you. At church, we have so many women that we call mom and so many men that we call dad, and they go out of they way to help you. . . Its just like a family. . . I have been in that church since I was 2 weeks old.

Thus, opportunities provided by the church and the support and high expectations that students

find there and at home serve to enhance academic self-concept, which is a positive and significant predictor of academic achievement.

School Behavior. Peter, a 13 year old African American male student with a 3.0 grade point average in his academic courses has been able to avoid serious disciplinary problems. He attributes this to the clear expectations that his mother, who is a school teacher, has established and the support that he receives from teachers. According to Peter, many of his friends do not perceive the same support from teachers, which negatively affects their school behavior. He states:

I haven't been in any fights or been suspended. There have been times when I could have gotten in a fight like once when I was playing and this person got mad, but I just walked away. I think that I walked away because I knew what would have happened to me if I went home suspended. I don't believe that after my mom finished with me, I would have been able to come back to school. . . . My mom is proud of my grades and doesn't expect me to get in trouble. . . . Some of my friends starting getting into trouble in the sixth grade. They started talking out in class, skipping class, talking back to teachers. . . . I think that they do it because they don't like the teachers or think the teachers don't like them. . . . If they liked . . . [the teachers] better, they would behave better. But I get along with my teachers very well, when I need help they always give it to me.

Through their support and high expectations, family members and teachers have

encouraged Valencia, a fourteen year old eighth grade student with a 2.5 grade point average, to improve her school behavior. She explains:

...[M]y grandma taught me the better way, she told me to change my attitude and I could live longer and have more friends that way, and get through school. She helped me and my whole family helped me. They care for me so much that if I forget something, they'll get on to me about it. She'll say, "Don't do it again, we gon' have a good talk." She tries to meet my teachers too. . . . The teachers, they give me knowledge to set my goals, they care about me and if they didn't they would never have stopped me from being this bad girl. They talk to me a lot.

Through support and clear expectations, adults in their families and schools help students like Valencia and Peter understand the importance of schooling and the benefits, both academic and social, of non-disruptive school behavior. These students are, thus, better able to monitor their school conduct.

CONCLUSION

This study illustrates how students' attitudes and behaviors work as processes that promote achievement. These important processes are directly affected by home, school and church support, and students are triply benefitted in many areas when all three contexts are working toward the same goal of helping them succeed in school. The results of the study, thus, raise the following question: How can institutional resources, both material and nonmaterial, be

most effectively used to promote the academic and personal success of all students? The answer may largely lie in the creation and maintenance of strong programs of school-family-community partnerships so that these institutions can better combine and coordinate the resources and support they provide youth (Epstein et. al., 1997).

This study identifies important attitudinal and behavioral qualities that influence student success and that may be enhanced by increased cooperation between schools, families and community institutions, such as the black church. These qualities are: academic self-concept and school behavior. Each is positively and significantly related to the academic achievement of the African-American, eighth-grade students in the study, even after accounting for sex, age, poverty level and family structure. The survey results are supported and clarified by the students' own voices and explanations.

The following examples illustrate how school-family-community partnership programs that include activities for Epstein's six types of involvement might enhance students' beliefs in their academic potential, as well as improve their school behavior in the middle grades.

Example 1. Schools in collaboration with community groups and agencies, including local churches, can conduct parenting classes and/or workshops to promote families' understanding of their early adolescents, and the families' continuing influence on students' attitudes and school behavior in middle grades. In addition, these workshops can help families strengthen and maintain skills and practices to promote more positive student behavior and attitudes toward school and the future.

Example 2. Schools, families, and community groups and agencies can design more effective communications so that students' efforts and achievements in one of these contexts are recognized and praised in the others.

Example 3. Family and community members may work as volunteers in middle schools and use the personal relationships developed with students in other settings to help teachers and administrators encourage pro-social, less disruptive school behavior. Volunteers could also serve as mentors to help students navigate the turbulent waters of adolescence, and avoid the maladaptive behaviors often associated with this developmental period.

The above examples are just a few of the many activities possible through school-family-community partnerships. The implementation of partnership programs has begun in schools throughout the United States. Case studies provide detailed accounts of how some of these schools are identifying student needs and developing practical school-family-community partnership activities to address them (Sanders, 1996a/b; Sanders, in press). Additional research is needed, however, to determine whether theorized outcomes are produced by particular partnership practices. In addition, research is needed to determine which partnership practices are most effective for specific populations, and which institutions are best suited for particular types of partnership. Research on these topics will better enable schools, families and communities to draw upon and combine the resources and skills they possess to promote greater achievement among all students, especially African-American, urban adolescents -- one of the populations at greatest risk for academic failure and school dropout.

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