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Parents and learning

By Sam Redding

EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES SERIES–2

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Series preface

This booklet concerns what parents can do to help their children do well in school. It has been prepared for inclusion in the Educational Practices Series developed by the International Academy of Education and distributed by the International Bureau of Education and the Academy. One mission of the International Academy of Education is to foster scholarly excellence in all fields of education. As part of this mission, the Academy provides timely syntheses of research on educational topics of international importance. This booklet focuses on parents—the child's first and most powerful teachers. The author is Sam Redding, who is executive director of the Academic Development Institute and editor of the *School community journal*. The academy is grateful to Dr. Redding for planning, drafting and revising this booklet. Dr. Redding wishes to thank Erik De Corte, Young-Joo Kim and Herbert Walberg for their comments on previous drafts of the booklet.

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The officers of the International Academy of Education are aware that this booklet is based on research carried out primarily in economically advanced countries. The booklet, however, focuses on aspects of learning that appear to be universal in much formal schooling and thus seem likely to be generally applicable throughout the world. Even so, the principles need to be assessed with reference to local conditions, and adapted accordingly. In any educational setting, guidelines for practice require sensitive and sensible application and continuing evaluation of their effectiveness.

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Introduction

Everywhere there is pressure for children to learn more in school. The new economy demands that young people leave school with strong abilities to read, write, calculate and apply disciplined thought to the solution of problems. Citizenship in every society requires an understanding of the history, government and tradition of not only that society but of many others as well. More and more the pursuit of individual happiness must begin with an educated view of a complex and rapidly changing world.

As schools have been pressed to be more effective and more productive, out-of-school influences on academic learning have escalated in importance. Even where the school day and school year have been lengthened, the amount of time children spend in school during the first eighteen years of their lives is small (perhaps 13% of waking hours) compared to time spent with the family and the broader community.

Fortunately, research on the family's influence on school learning has a substantial history, and we can settle upon basic premises with great confidence. With reasonable certainty we can state that poverty may statistically predict lower school performance, yet families that provide a stimulating, language-rich, supportive environment defy the odds of socio-economic circumstance. In other words, an alterable 'curriculum of the home'—including the family's relationships, practices and patterns of life—is a more powerful predictor of academic learning than the family's status. Schools can work with families to improve the curriculum of the home, regardless of the family's economic situation. This, then, is a message of great hope.

Research on the relationships among families who constitute a school community leans heavily on a long body of sociological literature on communities of all types. Recently, however, primarily within the past decade, a strand of this sociological research has focused on schools as communities, and we are arriving at a set of understandings that may soon achieve the status of theory.

As for what schools can do to affect family behaviours in ways that benefit children's learning, the research trail is shorter and less conclusive. There remains a great amount of experimentation, casting about to see what works. Some

initiatives have, in fact, worked, and we may report them, draw lessons from them, and generalize from them.

While the home's influence on academic learning is significant, the quality and quantity of instruction and the child's own cognitive abilities are of equal or greater significance. There is a danger, then, in placing too much emphasis (or blame) on the family's contribution to the learning equation while forgiving weaknesses in the school. By the same token, ignoring the gains to be made by helping families improve the alterable curriculum of the home limits the potential effectiveness of the school.

1. The curriculum of the home

Identifiable patterns of family life contribute to a child's ability to learn in school.

Research findings

Research on the curriculum of the home isolates specific patterns of family life that correspond with a child's success in academic learning. Specifically, studies have positively linked certain family practices with a child's learning. These family practices are listed here under three headings that will each be elucidated in later sections of this booklet.

THE PARENT/CHILD RELATIONSHIP

- Daily conversation about everyday events;
- Expressions of affection;
- Family discussion of books, newspapers, magazines, television programmes;
- Family visits to libraries, museums, zoos, historical sites, cultural activities; and
- Encouragement to try new words, expand vocabulary.

ROUTINE OF FAMILY LIFE

- Formal study time at home;
- A daily routine that includes time to eat, sleep, play, work, study and read;
- A quiet place to study and read; and
- Family interest in hobbies, games, activities of educational value.

FAMILY EXPECTATIONS AND SUPERVISION

- Priority given to schoolwork and reading over television and recreation;
- Expectation of punctuality;

- Parental expectation that children do their best;
- Concern for correct and effective use of language;
- Parental monitoring of children's peer group;
- Monitoring and joint analysis of televiewing; and
- Parental knowledge of child's progress in school and personal growth.

Application

When a child comes to school prepared by attitude, habit and skill to take the fullest advantage of the teacher's instruction, the teacher's own effectiveness is enhanced. Because we know that children learn best when their home environment includes the patterns of family life itemized above, it becomes the school's task to assist parents in providing a positive curriculum of the home. Encouragingly, the family practices included in the curriculum of the home are possible in nearly every home, regardless of the parents' level of education or socioeconomic status.

References: Applebee, Langer & Mullis (1989); Bloom (1964, 1981); Davé (1963); Dolan (1981); Graue, Weinstein & Walberg (1983); Keeves (1972); Marjoribanks (1979); Walberg (1984); Wang, Haertel & Walberg (1993); Wolf (1964).

2. The parent/child relationship

Children benefit from a parent/child relationship that is verbally rich and emotionally supportive.

Research findings

Language development begins at birth and centres on the child's interactions with his or her parents. Several parent/child interactions are important in preparing the child to learn in school: talking to the infant, listening attentively to the child, reading to children and listening to them read, talking about what the parent and the child are reading, storytelling, daily conversation and letter writing. It is difficult to separate verbal interactions from the emotional and affective bonds that accompany them. For that reason, the parents' expressions of affection are included with verbal activities as essential to the parent/child relationship. Also important is a constant demonstration by parents that learning is a natural part of life—joyful in its own right, part of the family experience, and especially exhilarating when encountered through discovery at such places as museums, zoos and historical sites.

Application

Do not all families talk about everyday events? Perhaps, but there is great variation in the quality and quantity of that interaction. Is the underlying tone of the conversation positive, supportive? Does the conversation flow in both directions—between parent and child? Do both parties listen as well as speak? As children grow older, the time spent in conversation with parents may decline. Daily touchstone routines, such as a relaxed dinnertime, provide continued opportunity for family conversation.

A consistent emotional bond between parent and child, seen in expressions of affection, renders the child more psy-

chologically equipped to meet the stresses and challenges of life outside the home, especially in school. Affection is also a social lubricant for the family, cementing relationships and helping children develop positive attitudes about school and learning.

When families talk about books, newspapers, magazines and television programmes, children's minds are treated to the delight of verbal inquiry. The drama of unfolding events and the clash of differing opinions open doors to intellectual pursuit for children. Curiosity is kept alive. Stimulating the child's desire to discover, to think through new situations and to vigorously exchange opinions, is fostered also by family visits to libraries, museums, zoos, historical sites and cultural events.

Vocabulary is the building block of thought and expression. All small children love to try new words. In some families, exploration with words is encouraged; in fact, it is an ongoing source of family pleasure. But some children are exposed to ridicule when they mispronounce or misuse a new word; their love for words may be extinguished, and they may feel constrained to cling to a limited vocabulary.

Parents can be taught, through role-playing techniques, to be good listeners with their children, to extend meagre daily dialogue into rich family conversation, and to play word games that promote an interest in vocabulary. They can also be encouraged to visit museums and other stimulating places and to engage their children in the excitement of discovery. Parents can even learn the importance of affectionate contact with their children, especially at times when the child may be fearful or anxious—when leaving the home in the morning and when going to sleep at night, for example.

Busy families can fall out of the habit of daily conversation. Asking parents to spend at least one minute each day in private conversation with each child, primarily listening to the child tell about his or her day without distraction from other family members or television, will demonstrate how rare and precious such moments can be. Sharing these experiences with other parents, in small-group settings, amplifies their impact.

References: Becher (1984); Kellaghan et al. (1993); Rutter (1990).

3. The routine of family life

Children do best in school when parents provide predictable boundaries for their lives, encourage productive use of time, and provide learning experiences as a regular part of family life.

Research findings

Studies find that the routine of family life, the daily interactions between parents and children, the types of hobbies and recreational activities the family enjoys, all have a bearing on children's readiness for school learning. When children from low-income families do things with their parents on weekends, have dinner as a family and engage in family hobbies, they make up for some of the disadvantages of poverty, and their school performance improves.

How time is used is an important consideration in the homes of high-achieving students. While the parents encourage their children's independence, they do so with a constant eye on how successfully their children are managing their freedom. They praise productivity and accomplishment. They challenge their children to use time wisely. Children in these homes are accustomed to calendars, schedules, grocery lists, 'to do' lists, household chores, reading, studying and playing mentally challenging games. One study found that high-achieving students spend about twenty hours each week outside of school in constructive learning activities, often with the support, guidance or participation of their parents. These activities might include homework, music practice, reading, writing, visiting museums and engaging in learning activities sponsored by youth organizations.

Application

When the family sets aside time each day for children to study, rather than asking children to study only when required to do

so by their teachers, the children learn that studying is valued by the family. Studying and learning become a natural part of family life. Children do their best when they operate within the boundaries of the family's settled routine. Some activities are daily touchstones; they define the flow of time and enable children to attend to activities of high priority, such as studying, reading and talking with family members. Eating meals at about the same time each day, going to bed at about the same time, and studying and reading at about the same time will establish a productive and healthful rhythm for children's lives. Children also need a predictably quiet and well-lit place to study and read. They benefit from family interest in hobbies, games and other activities that exercise the mind and engage the child in interaction with other people. A daily routine that includes a time to study and read, a home environment that provides a quiet place to study, and family activities that include games and hobbies which engage children's minds and provide interaction with other family members characterize a home where children are prepared by habit and value to learn in school.

References: Benson, Buckley & Medrich (1980); Clark (1983, 1990).

4. Family expectations and supervision

Parents set standards for their children, and these standards determine what children view as important.

Research findings

Studies find that children do better in school when their parents set high but realistic academic standards for them. Parents of good learners also place importance on verbal interaction; they question their children to prompt further thought and expression, they challenge them to use new words, and they expect them to speak with precision. Families with high expectations for their children's school performance also provide consistent guidance and support for schooling. They are aware of their children's progress and interested in the academic route their children are plotting. Researchers find that a strong work ethic contributes to success in school. Also important is a family attitude that accomplishments result from effort rather than innate ability or 'playing the system'. Further, children benefit when their parents are attentive to their whereabouts, know their friends, monitor their televiewing, and maintain contact with their teachers.

Application

Several exercises can be employed to help parents understand the standards and examples they are setting for their children. One exercise is to simply sketch a typical weekly schedule of the child's activities beyond the school day. When does the child usually study? Read? Play with friends? Watch television? Examining the schedule gives a clue to the relative priority the family is giving to each activity.

Parents often look to teachers for guidelines. The expectation that children spend a minimum amount of time studying and reading each day (perhaps ten minutes for each grade

level) is such a guideline. The dangers of television may be exaggerated, but when children watch television more than ninety minutes a day, school performance falls off. At some point the amount of time given to television is being robbed from a more productive activity, such as reading or studying.

Parents sometimes need to be reminded that children benefit from varied activities, including recreational and social activities, and that schoolwork need not replace these activities. Studying and reading, however, should come first. Parents can help their children develop their own schedule each week, allowing them to set aside time for fun if they have first allotted adequate time for study.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge for a parent is to know when a child is doing his or her best. Setting high but realistic expectations is easier said than done. When it comes to schoolwork, however, a good approach is to consider the child's study habits and attitude toward school rather than focusing solely on the child's marks. This is not to say that marks are unimportant; but marks can be deceptive. Some children achieve reasonably high marks with little effort, and fail to develop good study habits as a consequence. Other children work hard but never achieve the highest marks; they may be doing their best and their dedication to their learning deserves praise. Comparing siblings is a particular pitfall for parents.

A simple rule for parents is that they always know *where* their children are, *what* they are doing, and *who* they are with. Being sure to meet their child's friends and knowing the names and addresses of the friends' parents is a good prerequisite for allowing a child to spend time with a peer. Regular communication with their children's teachers is equally important.

References: Bradley, Caldwell & Elardo (1977); Gordon et al. (1979); Hess & Shipman (1965); Keeves (1975); Stevenson (1990).

5. Homework

Students learn best when homework is assigned regularly, graded, returned promptly, and used primarily to rehearse material first presented by the teacher at school.

Research findings

Homework, properly utilized by teachers, produces an effect on learning three times as large as family socio-economic status. Homework is effective in student mastery of facts and concepts as well as critical thinking and formation of productive attitudes and habits. Homework has compensatory effects in that students of lower ability can achieve marks equal to those of higher ability students through increased study at home. Homework is also a significant factor in differences in achievement test scores.

In addition to its positive effect on academic achievement, homework:

- establishes the habit of studying in the home;
- prepares the student for independent learning;
- can be a focal point of constructive family interaction;
- allows the parents to see what the student is learning in school;
- competes with televiewing rather than with constructive activities in most homes;
- extends formal learning beyond the school day;
- enables the student to reflect on material and become more intimately familiar with it than is often allowed in a busy, sometimes distracting school setting; and
- provides the teacher with a frequent check on the student's progress.

Research is helpful in establishing expectations for teachers in the effective use of homework. A study of the effectiveness of homework in mathematics, for example, concluded the following:

- required homework is more effective than voluntary homework;

- having no homework assigned at one grade level adversely affects performance at subsequent grade levels; and
- homework is most effective when returned promptly by the teacher with comments and a grade.

Other studies attest to the importance of the teacher grading and placing written comments on homework. Daily homework assignments have been found superior to less frequent assignments.

Application

The effects of homework do not increase proportionately with the amount assigned, but rather with the frequency (or regularity) of its assignment, the nature of the assignment, and the teacher's attention to the student's work. Homework is most effective when it is:

- frequent;
- directly related to in-class work;
- used to master rather than introduce new material;
- graded and included as a significant part of the report card grade; and
- returned to the student soon after it is collected, and marked with comments particular to the student.

Schools facilitate parents, students and teachers in their efforts with homework by establishing a school-wide standard for frequency and quantity of homework. For example, some schools expect about ten minutes of homework each school night for first-graders, and elevate the expectations by an additional ten minutes for each year of school. This is a good way to gradually and consistently develop homework habits.

References: Austin (1976); Elawar & Corno (1985); Keith (1982); Page (1958); Page & Keith (1981); Paschel, Weinstein & Walberg (1984); Walberg (1984).

6. School/home communication

Children benefit from communication between their parents and their teachers that flows in both directions.

Research findings

Students do best when parents and teachers understand each other's expectations and stay in touch with one another regarding the child's learning habits, attitudes toward school, social interactions and academic progress. The school, through the leadership of its administration and the school's policies and programmes, can create an atmosphere conducive to communication and provide convenient opportunities for communication. Teachers are most inclined to initiate communication with parents when they perceive that administrators value such communication, their colleagues are supportive of parental involvement, and the parents seem appreciative of the outreach. Communication between the school and the home is most effective when it flows in both directions, and schools should distinguish between efforts to inform parents and opportunities to communicate with parents.

Application

The following examples of school/home communication provide convenient and effective communication between parents and school personnel.

PARENT/TEACHER/STUDENT CONFERENCES

Prepare an agenda for parent/teacher/student conferences that encourages the participation of all three parties. Let parents know the agenda in advance of the conference. Include such questions as: How would the parents describe the child's study habits at home? Does the child read at home?

REPORT CARDS

Report cards are typically used by teachers to inform parents about the child's progress in school. But report cards can become two-way by including the parents' report of the child's progress at home with such school-related topics as: willingness to do homework; reading for pleasure; moderation of televiewing; and attitude toward learning. The cards might also encourage parents to note specific concerns or request conferences.

SCHOOL NEWSLETTER

Many schools publish newsletters. To encourage two-way communication, ask parents to write articles for the newsletter. What tips can parents give for helping kids with homework? What family activities would parents like to share? Has the family visited a museum, historical site or other place of educational value?

HAPPY-GRAMS

Print pads of Happy-Grams for teachers to send notes to parents complimenting students for specific achievements and behaviours. Because teachers also appreciate notes of kindness, distribute pads of Happy-Grams to parents. Print blank Happy-Grams forms in the newsletter. Parents can clip the forms from the newsletter and send notes to teachers.

OPEN DOOR PARENT/TEACHER CONFERENCES

Designate a certain time when teachers are available for walk-in conferences. Some schools set aside thirty minutes before school each morning (or on certain days of the week) when all teachers are available to parents.

PARENT BULLETIN BOARD

Place a bulletin board, especially for parents, at the main entry to the school. Parents can conveniently check the board for notes about parent meetings, suggestions for helping children with homework, notices about family activities and calendars of important events.

HOME LINKS FROM THE CLASSROOM

Parents like to know what their child is learning at school. A weekly take-home that lists a few topics covered at school that week is helpful. The take-home may also include examples of parent/child activities that would be related to what is being learned at school.

ASSIGNMENT NOTEBOOKS

A notebook in which students record each day's assignments (and perhaps also keep track of the marks they earn) is helpful in keeping students on track. When parents are asked to view, date and initial the notebook and the teacher routinely examines the notebook, a good student/teacher/parent communication link is established.

References: Epstein (1987); Epstein & Dauber (1991); Hauser-Cram (1983); Swap (1993).

7. Parental involvement

Parental involvement includes parents' involvement with their own children, involvement with parents of other children, and involvement with their children's school.

Research findings

'Parental involvement' is an all-encompassing and imprecise term that includes everything from the parent's child-rearing practices at home to the parent's participation in events held at school. Included in the child-rearing practices may be those aspects of parenting that have particular application to the child's performance in school (the curriculum of the home), as well as more general practices of feeding, nurturing and caring for children. Included in the category of events held at the school would be everything from attendance at athletic competitions to participation in parent/teacher conferences and completion of extensive parent education courses.

A commonly accepted typology of parental involvement includes the following categories:

- parenting (caring for and nurturing the child);
- communicating (maintaining a flow of information between parent and school);
- volunteering (helping at the school);
- learning at home (supporting and supplementing the instruction of the school);
- decision-making (part of the school's decision-making structure); and
- collaboration with the community at large (representing the school in partnerships with other organizations).

Researchers point to impediments to parental involvement:

- Defining too narrowly the scope of parental involvement to include only attendance at formal meetings and other activities held at the school, assigning too little importance to the parent's relationship with the child at home.

- Low expectation on the part of school personnel, for example assuming that single parents or low-income parents are not able to provide the support and guidance their children require.
- Lack of preparation for teachers to enable them to involve parents in ways that facilitate school learning.
- Occupational obstacles that make it difficult for parents to be available at times convenient to school personnel.
- Parental attitudes about or experiences with schools that make them resistant to contact with school personnel.

Application

Because a school may expect only limited access to and influence over most parents, it should carefully select the ways it expects parents to be involved. In general, parents' involvement in curriculum-of-the-home activities with their children is more beneficial to the children's school learning than involvement with activities at the school. A parent's relationship with other parents in the child's school, and the parent's communication with the child's classroom teacher are, however, important to the child's success in school. And the quality of the school may depend upon the willingness of some parents to be at the table when institutional decisions are made. The typology shown here can provide the school a good framework for developing a range of parent-involvement programmes and activities.

References: Carr & Wilson (1997); Epstein (1995); Yap & Enoki (1995).

8. Parent education

Programmes to teach parents to enhance the home environment in ways that benefit their children's learning take a variety of forms and may produce substantial outcomes.

Research findings

Parent education includes home visits by parent educators, group sessions led by previously trained parents, and workshops and courses taught by experts. The home-visit model is typically directed at parents of pre-school children and includes explanations of the child's developmental stage and examples of appropriate parent-child activities. Parent group sessions enable parents to learn in a small-group setting, carry out activities with their children between sessions, and discuss their experience with other parents. When led by other parents rather than teachers or experts, these parent groups are collegial and non-threatening. Workshops and courses conducted by experts—educators, psychologists or paediatricians, for example—have the advantage of research-based content and access to professional knowledge. Research shows that programmes that teach mothers to improve the quality of cognitive stimulation and verbal interaction produce immediate effects on the child's intellectual development. When parents learn systems for monitoring and guiding their children's out-of-school time, the children do better in school. Schools that teach parents ways to reinforce school learning at home find that students are more motivated to learn and attend school more regularly. Parent education programmes enhance teacher/parent communication and the attitude of parents toward the school. Efforts to encourage family reading activities result in the children's improved reading skills and interest in reading. Programmes that include both parents and children are more effective than programmes that deal with only the parents. Home-visit programmes are most effective when combined with group meetings with other parents.

Application

The obstacles to school-sponsored parent education can be daunting. Some parents are not receptive to the good intentions of parent education providers, and recruiting participants for parent education programmes can be a frustrating process. Teachers usually have quite enough to do caring for their students; working with parents can be seen as an added burden. So the twin problems of parent education are: (a) providing personnel to organize and deliver the parent education programmes; and (b) attracting parents to the programmes.

Home-visit models are labour-intensive and therefore expensive. But because they are directed at the parents of pre-school children, they have the advantage of a parent clientele that is very receptive to parent education. Taking the programme to the parents at their home makes home visits convenient for parents, places the educator in the natural setting of the home, and enables the parent educator to focus on one family at a time.

Small-group sessions led by previously trained parents are inexpensive, encourage parental attachment to the school, and allow parents to share experiences and assist one another. On the other hand, attracting parents to sessions offered outside the home requires substantial attention to recruitment.

Strategies for schools and teachers:

- Partner with other organizations that can affect parenting in the pre-school years through home visits and other efforts: paediatricians, public health, community organizations and churches, for example.
- Make a specific list of what the school wants from parents according to the age group of the child, then organize parent education around this list.
- Publish, inform, monitor, support and assist with homework policies.
- Use parents to organize, recruit and lead other parents.
- Consider field-tested, proven models and curricula.
- Focus on the curriculum of the home.

References: Clarke-Stewart & Apfel (1978); Becher (1984); Epstein (1987); Gray & Wandersman (1980); Rich (1985); Walberg & Wallace (1992); Wallace & Walberg (1991).

9. Family/school relationships

Because families vary in their relationship to schools, schools must use different strategies to engage all families in the learning lives of their children.

Research findings

Family/school relationships may be viewed as corresponding to three historical phases of economic development. In the first phase, typical of agricultural societies, but also of some families in all societies, the family lives at a subsistence level, relying on children for work (or, more commonly in modern States, for emotional comfort). In this situation, the family may limit the educational potential of the child, and the school's role is to expand the possibilities for the child's development. In the second phase, common to the industrial economy, the goals of the family and the school converge, with both institutions seeking the improvement of the child's ultimate economic situation. In the third phase, that of post-industrial affluence, parents find the demands of child-rearing competing with the pursuits of their adult lives. They expect the school to fill the void.

Application

In modern societies, we find all three types of families described in the previous paragraph. Placing any family in a category can be an injustice to that family, but characterizing common family situations and strategies for engaging them can be instructive.

DISTRESSED FAMILIES

Some families, usually those living in poverty, are severely pressed by the demands of everyday life. They often possess

limited parenting skills, lack social contacts and have access to few models of good child-rearing practices. They may be intimidated by teachers and see the school as a bearer of bad news. They are likely to perceive that they are targets of discrimination. Parent education programmes that show them how to relate to their children are helpful, but first they need genuine, personal expressions of goodwill from school personnel and other parents. They must be engaged within a non-threatening, positive and supportive social context, often provided by other parents rather than by school personnel.

CHILD-CENTRED FAMILIES

The child-centred family understands the necessity of schooling to the economic betterment of their children. These families often fear that the school is inadequately attentive to their children. They are frustrated by what they perceive as negative social influences, and they may cast aspersions upon other parents, whom they see as lax and uncaring. On the other hand, these parents are willing to work for their children's school, provide leadership among parents, and serve as surrogate parents for neglected children. They are best engaged by giving them constructive roles in the school and opportunities to work with other parents. The challenge for the school is to channel the efforts of child-centred parents toward activities that benefit the academic and personal development of their own children and of other children. Child-centred parents make wonderful leaders for parent education programmes.

PARENT-CENTRED FAMILIES

Busy professional parents value schooling but are sometimes so absorbed by their careers and personal interests that they are disengaged from close involvement in their children's lives. To compensate, they place their children in the best schools, thus entrusting their children to what they see as competent, hired professionals. They do the same in other aspects of their children's lives, providing experiences for their children through programmes and services they employ. These talented, well-connected parents possess financial resources, education, social contacts and professional skills. They must be re-engaged with their children by means that are nearly spiritual. Their conversion comes through the heart. If directed into

intimate relationships with their children, they are reminded of the satisfaction that they deny themselves by relegating child-rearing responsibilities to others.

References: Coleman & Husén (1985); Redding (1991); Taylor (1994).

10. Families and communities

When the families of children in a school associate with one another, social capital is increased, children are watched over by a larger number of caring adults, and parents share standards, norms and the experiences of child-rearing.

Research findings

In many societies, bonds of community no longer envelop the families of children who happen to attend the same school. This means that parents do not necessarily associate with one another away from the school, and their contact with one another in connection with the school is very limited. As a consequence, children spend their school days sitting next to, influencing and being influenced by other children, yet the parents of these children do not know one another. Many children spend a great portion of their out-of-school hours alone or with other children, not under the supervision of caring adults. Children benefit when the adults around them share basic values about child-rearing, communicate with one another, and give the children consistent support and guidance. Social capital, the asset available to children that resides in the relationships among adults in their lives, depends upon face-to-face association of these adults. A school that views itself as a community of its constituents (school personnel, students, families of students), rather than an organization, is more likely to encourage the social interactions that lead to the accumulation of social capital.

Application

A school is capable of forming and nurturing community among its constituents—school personnel and the families of

its students. A framework for building a school community will include ways to articulate commonly held values about education, draw parents together with other parents and with teachers, and enable the school to function as an institutional champion of the families' educational desires for their children. Elements of a programme to enhance community in a school would include:

- *Representation*: Parents are included in decision-making groups at the school.
- *Educational values*: Parents and teachers together articulate the educational values common to the school, and the school's goals and its expectations of students, teachers and parents flow from these shared values.
- *Communication*: Two-way communication between the home and the school is afforded through a variety of means, including parent/teacher/student conferences, telephone conversations, notes and assignment notebooks.
- *Education*: Education programmes for teachers and parents are provided in order to constantly improve everyone's ability to help children succeed.
- *Common experience*: All students, and often their parents and teachers, are engaged in collective events or connected to common strains in the educational programme that unite them and allow them to share common educational experiences.
- *Association*: The school arranges opportunities for groups of school-community members to associate with one another, particularly for reasons relative to the purposes of the school. For example, groups of parents with other parents, groups of parents and teachers, younger students with older students, and intergenerational mentoring between students and adult volunteers (including 'grandparents').

When a school decides to reach out to the community to tap resources, it is wise to first determine its students' unmet needs, then approach community organizations to negotiate the delivery of services that might meet these needs. Student needs not easily met by the school's own resources might include: basic family needs (clothing, food, housing, child care); health needs (vaccination, examination, dental care); behavioural therapy; recreation; tutoring; psychological testing; mentoring; equipment for disabilities; respite care; opportunities relative to special talents or interests (scientific,

musical, artistic, athletic, literary). Once student needs have been listed and matched with a catalogue of community resources, students and their families can be systematically connected with appropriate services.

References: Coleman (1987, 1990); Etzioni (1993); Redding (1991); Sergiovani (1994).

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