

# Connecting Families and Schools through Mediating Structures

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Despite increasing evidence that parental involvement improves children's performance in schools and improves schools (Henderson, 1980, 1987, Henderson & Berla 1994), there are continuing problems of involving low-income parents and other low-status parents in the schools their children attend. Studies have shown that the problem of involving these so-called "hard to reach" parents in their children's schooling exists in several countries (Davies, et al., 1987).

Ogbu (1978, 1983) has examined the relationship between the poor school performance of low-status children in a society and discontinuities between the cultural backgrounds of those children and the culture of the schools they attend. His research suggests that while discontinuities exist between home and school for all children, the discontinuities are greatest and the school performance is poorest for caste-like minorities in societies. For these caste-like groups, their lower caste position of inferiority in the society surpasses any class stratification that exists so the groups may not view the schools as a means of upward mobility, because change upward in class status does not result in change in caste status. The problem of caste status is therefore a major social problem especially for racial minorities in some societies.

The existence of the larger societal issue of the caste-like status of some groups in societies has sometimes led educators to assert that schools are unable to counteract major societal problems of poverty and discrimination. Therefore until society changes, schools are unlikely to change. However, evidence of successful schools within communities of caste-like minorities challenges the assertion that schools must follow, rather than lead, positive social change (Comer, 1980, 1990, Slavin & Madden 2000).

While there are some successful schools in low-income and minority communities, such schools are still not prevalent in these communities. A study by Davis, et al. (1987) examines this problem in Portugal and reveals a number of concerns which are linked to two closely related variables: (1) poor communication between home and school, and (2) limited outreach from schools to homes, especially in communities with large numbers of poor and minority students. Both variables are related to issues of power and the reduced ability of people with low status in a society to benefit from the society. The purpose of this article is to suggest a social strategy to use mediating structures to promote empowerment of low-status families in schools to address the cross-national problem of persistent poor school performance of children of low-status groups.

Mediating structures have been defined by Berger and Neuhaus as “. . . those institutions standing between the individual and his private life and the large institutions of public life” (1980). For each child, therefore, the institution of the family is a mediating structure between him or her and the school. However, Bourdieu (1977) suggests that the ability of the family to mediate between the child and the school is a function of the amount of cultural capital or skills, disposition, background, and knowledge the family possesses, and low-income and minority families are less likely to successfully mediate for their children because they have less cultural capital that schools value and reward than do high-income and mainstream families. The result is these families appear hard to reach because they are less likely to initiate communication with or respond to communication from schools (Heleen, 1988).

Reports of feelings of inadequacy in relations with schools are not uncommon from these families. In his study in Portugal, for example, Davies reported that one parent said, “When my child has a problem, I feel ashamed” (1987). Low-status families frequently say they don’t understand how schools work, and they feel denigrated by teachers. Feelings of inadequacy are more severe if parents’ own educational backgrounds are limited or if their school experiences were negative. However, some parents are not intimidated by schools – they are simply preoccupied with providing basic necessities of food, shelter, and clothing for their families, or they are in need of child care in order to have time available to become involved in schools.

Any or all of the reasons cited above – feelings of inadequacy, limited school background, or preoccupation with basic necessities – may prevent parents from communicating with schools. However, schools are in the best position to initiate communication. They are more powerful and better able to reach out to parents than parents are able to reach into schools. Therefore, when schools’ communication with parents is difficult, other institutions close to the family are needed to support the family structure, and promote

empowerment to increase the family's capacity to overcome fears and other constraints. It is therefore suggested that schools use mediating structures within and around families to promote family empowerment. These mediating structures include (1) extended family members, (2) neighborhood groups, (3) religious groups, and (4) other voluntary associations.

## Mediating Structures

Before discussing the use of mediating structures, it is necessary to examine mediation and how it occurs. If one accepts the premise that basic values are generated and maintained primarily through families and their extensions, including neighborhoods, religious groups, and voluntary associations, then the family and these extensions are the structures that mediate (or stand between) the individual and megastructures within the state such as schools and other instruments of government. Seeley (1985) noted the relationship between education and mediation structures:

Whatever else education may be, it is a process by which people seek to transmit their world, and most particularly their values, to their children. It is a primary strength of mediating structures that they are value generating and value bearing institutions. This is especially true of family, church, and voluntary associations.

Mediation occurs when people we know and trust advocate for us and represent our interests to people we know less well or not at all. Mediation is therefore a special type of advocacy because it provides representation of our interests by advocates with greater power than we have. In the case of schools, the greater power of our advocates may be shown by their greater knowledge of (1) language used in the school, (2) school requirements and procedures, (3) school curriculum, (4) expectations of the school for children's behavior (including but not limited to discipline), or (5) school culture which determines who to speak to, when and how to speak, and what to ask for.

Items one through five above involve negotiating the institutional culture of schools. Negotiations with schools as a societal subculture are complicated and require knowledge of norms, mores, and styles that operate within schools but are less likely to operate in the homes and neighborhoods of people from cultural groups that are not part of the mainstream culture of a society. Knowledge of the mainstream culture and, therefore, knowledge of the school culture, is part of the cultural capital of

high-status groups in a society, but that knowledge may be only partially known, or not known at all, by low-status groups. However, some family members in low-status groups may have greater skills and experience in school negotiations and these persons should be encouraged to mediate for other family members. For immigrant parents who don't speak the mainstream language, for example, there might be a teenage child, relative, or friend who can mediate for the parents by attending school meetings, conferences with teachers, or school events.

### **Suggestion: Families as Mediating Structures**

Schools interested in promoting family outreach and increasing involvement should find ways of informing parents of the possibility of sending an advocate to schools, getting questions answered through advocates and getting their assistance as needed. Schools may consider providing special training for family advocates so that the process of representation is improved and might include steps that might be followed to have parents accompany advocates and receive help from them in orientation sessions that help parents begin to function in schools with less and less assistance.

#### **Examples**

This empowerment process through advocacy might require different amounts of time for different parents, but the sequence of steps could be the same for all parents. This sequence could include the following steps for schools to take: (1) sending information home to inform parents about the use of advocates to assist them in learning about schools, (2) providing examples of ways that advocates might help families, (3) suggesting helpful items to discuss with advocates such as the school-year calendar, school curriculum, homework requirements, school procedures, and school people to contact for particular needs, (4) inviting parents to an orientation meeting to which they may bring advocates, (5) visiting parents at home to complete this orientation to give parents an opportunity to ask questions that they may be uncomfortable asking in a group meeting, and (6) continuing home visits to assist parents in helping children with homework (Johnson, 1991, 1994). It is very important that advocates continue to assist parents until they feel comfortable functioning in schools alone.

### **Suggestion: Neighborhood Groups as Mediating**

## Structures

Before functioning in schools without advocates, parents may feel more comfortable meeting school personnel in parents' neighborhoods. Families live in neighborhoods whose boundaries they define. Neighborhoods are those places which provide the comfort of familiarity of people, places, procedures, events, and landmarks. The public schools located in neighborhoods don't necessarily provide the sense of comfort of familiarity provided by other places such as food shops, post offices, and specialty shops because none of the shops have the level of authority or the same ability to judge a child's future as schools. Given the power of schools to determine our futures, it is no wonder that people feel intimidated by them. Therefore, schools are often citadels of authority and power in neighborhoods, but often not a comfortable part of neighborhoods because they do not reach out to the communities that surround them. However, neighborhood communities can serve as mediating structures between families and schools if schools encourage outreach to the neighborhood. Just as extended family members with greater negotiating skills can serve as advocates of families who lack adequate school language skills or other skills necessary for negotiation with schools, members of neighborhood groups, organizations, and business people can also mediate on behalf of families.

### Examples

For example, business people whose shops are frequented by families over time come to know those families well, watch their children grow and can often advocate on behalf of the children, represent a family or serve as translators for families without sufficient knowledge of the school language. Similarly, family physicians, dentists, nurses, and other professionals can often mediate between families and schools. But neighborhood advocates need not be business or professional people to mediate successfully; they need only have the skills necessary to negotiate with schools and be willing to use those skills on behalf of families in order to be successful mediators. The key is for schools to encourage such mediation or advocacy so that parents know that schools are willing to accept their representative and they can then request help from those people they know and trust to help them negotiate the unknown school culture.

Within any neighborhood, residents know who has the skills to assist them. Usually, the problem is not that families cannot identify assistance, but schools don't encourage advocacy for families. Schools usually assume that parents know how schools function and they make no provision for those parents who do not. By encouraging parents to seek assistance and

bring those advocates with them to the schools until they feel comfortable in mediating for their children, schools are more likely to have successful outreach to parents who are outside the mainstream culture.

### **Suggestion: Religious Groups as Mediating Structures**

Given the separation between church and state in most countries, public schools avoid any contact with religious groups because educators may believe such contact is outside their scope of work. While there are indeed possible difficulties in working through religious groups in order to encourage their mediation on behalf of families, schools should consider ways these groups serve families in the community and determine how the religious groups might also serve families on behalf of children in schools.

#### **Examples**

For example, religious affiliation is a form of extended family grouping which people join because they share values and feel comfortable. The fact that people feel more comfortable in these places should provide an opportunity for school outreach. Religious groups have building space where parents may feel more comfortable to come for orientation information about schools. The schools might also meet with religious leaders to request their help in getting information to parents about school procedures, curriculum, and special events. Often religious leaders are willing to organize tutoring programs, language classes for parents or other meetings which will help parents to learn about schools and help their children increase their school performance. The suggestion is not that schools involve themselves with the religious beliefs of their students, but rather consider the possibility of connecting with parents to invite their involvement in school activities through the mediation of religious leaders who are close to the parents. Schools should reach out to parents where they are, and they are in families, neighborhoods, and religious gatherings.

### **Suggestion: Voluntary Associations as Mediating Structures**

In addition to religious groups, many parents also belong to other voluntary associations, through which schools may reach out to them. These voluntary associations include, but are not limited to, clubs, benefit societies, sports organizations, musical and literary associations, Masonic organizations, and all types of interest groups. Many such voluntary

associations are found in communities throughout the world, and they provide a source of affiliation and support for people. Since they are voluntary, they indicate whom people want to associate with and whom they respect and trust. The associations therefore represent a mediating structure through which schools might reach parents and other family members to invite their involvement in schools for the benefit of children.

### Examples

For example, a school might invite a musical or craft association to perform a concert or present an exhibit at the school. Parents in the association whose children attend the school could be given special recognition. Perhaps those parents could make a special presentation to their children's classes. Thus parents are invited into the schools through the voluntary association to which they belong, thereby improving the schools' connections to both the community association and to the parents of children in the school. Parents who may be shy about performing in the school alone are more likely to come with the group initially and may perform alone at a later time. In addition to addressing the possible problem of shy parents, the school is also acknowledging talent and ability in the community.

### Conclusion

Educators' acknowledgement of skills and talents in neighborhoods in which schools are located sends an important, positive message to families that the educators value the communities in which the school is located. By failing to develop positive communication with local neighborhoods, educators in low-income and minority communities frequently send the message that there is nothing in those communities worthy of educators' consideration. Schools therefore stand as citadels of exclusion inside the communities they are supposed to serve. In contrast, those educators that find ways to use mediating structures to reach out to families, neighborhoods, religious groups, and other voluntary associations near their school are more likely to promote all children's academic and social success in schools.

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