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Author(s): Annette Lareau
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SOCIAL CLASS DIFFERENCES IN FAMILY-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS: THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

ANNETTE LAREAU
Southern Illinois University

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This paper summarizes a qualitative study of family-school relationships in white working-class and middle-class communities. The results indicate that schools have standardized views of the proper role of parents in schooling. Moreover, social class provides parents with unequal resources to comply with teachers' requests for parental participation. Characteristics of family life (e.g., social networks) also intervene and mediate family-school relationships. The social and cultural elements of family life that facilitate compliance with teachers' requests can be viewed as a form of cultural capital. The study suggests that the concept of cultural capital can be used fruitfully to understand social class differences in children's school experiences.

The influence of family background on children's educational experiences has a curious place within the field of sociology of education. On the one hand, the issue has dominated the field. Wielding increasingly sophisticated methodological tools, social scientists have worked to document, elaborate, and replicate the influence of family background on educational life chances (Jencks et al. 1972; Marjoribanks 1979). On the other hand, until recently, research on this issue focused primarily on educational *outcomes;* very little attention was given to the *processes* through which these educational patterns are created and reproduced.

Over the past fifteen years, important strides have been made in our understanding of social processes inside the school. Ethnographic research has shown that classroom learning is reflexive and interactive and that language in the classroom draws unevenly from the sociolinguistic experiences of children at home (Bernstein 1975, 1982; Cook-Gumperez 1973; Heath 1982, 1983; Labov 1972; Diaz, Moll, and Mehan 1986; Mehan and Griffin 1980). Studies of the curriculum, the hidden curriculum, the social organization of the classroom, and the authority relationships between teachers and students have also suggested ways in which school processes contribute to social reproduction (Aggleton and Whitty 1985; Anyon 1981; Apple 1979; Erickson and Mohatt 1982; Gearing and Epstein 1982; Gaskell 1985; Taylor 1984; Valli 1985; Wilcox 1977, 1982).

Surprisingly, relatively little of this research has focused on parental involvement in schooling. Yet, quantitative studies suggest that parental behavior can be a crucial determinant of educational performance (Epstein 1984; Marjoribanks 1979). In addition, increasing parental participation in education has become a priority for educators, who believe it promotes educational achievement (Berger 1983; Seeley 1984; National Education Association 1985; Robinson 1985; Trelease 1982; Leichter 1979).

Those studies that have examined parental involvement in education generally take one of three major conceptual approaches to understanding variations in levels of parental participation. Some researchers subscribe to the culture-of-poverty thesis, which states that lower-class culture has distinct values and forms of social organization. Although their interpretations vary, most of these researchers suggest that lower-class and working-class families do not value education as highly as middle-class families (Deutsch 1967). Other analysts trace unequal levels of parental involvement in schooling back to the educational institutions themselves. Some accuse schools of institutional discrimination, claiming that they make middle-class families feel more welcome than working-class and lower-class families (Lightfoot 1978; Ogbu 1974). In an Australian study of home-school relationships, for example, Connell et al. (1982) argue that working-class parents are "frozen out" of schools. Others maintain that institutional differentiation, particularly the role of teacher leadership, is a critical determinant of parental involvement in schooling (Epstein and Becker 1982; Becker and Epstein 1982).

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A third perspective for understanding varying levels of parental involvement in schooling draws on the work of Bourdieu and the concept of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1977*a*, 1977*b*; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) argues that schools draw unevenly on the social and cultural resources of members of the society. For example, schools utilize particular linguistic structures, authority patterns, and types of curricula; children from higher social locations enter schools already familiar with these social arrangements. Bourdieu maintains that the cultural experiences in the home facilitate children's adjustment to school and academic achievement, thereby transforming cultural resources into what he calls cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977*a*, 1977*b*).

This perspective points to the structure of schooling and to family life and the dispositions of individuals (what Bourdieu calls habitus [1977*b*, 1981]) to understand different levels of parental participation in schooling. The standards of schools are not neutral; their requests for parental involvement may be laden with the social and cultural experiences of intellectual and economic elites. Bourdieu does not examine the question of parental participation in schooling, but his analysis points to the importance of class and class cultures in facilitating or impeding children's (or parents') negotiation of the process of schooling (also see Baker and Stevenson 1986; Connell et al. 1982; Joffee 1977; Ogbu 1974; Rist 1978; McPherson 1972; Gracey 1972; Wilcox 1977, 1982).

In this paper I argue that class-related cultural factors shape parents' compliance with teachers' requests for parental participation in schooling. I pose two major questions. First, what do schools ask of parents in the educational experience of young children? Are there important variations in teachers' expectations of parental involvement in elementary schooling? Second, how do parents respond to schools' requests? In particular, how does social class influence the process through which parents participate in their children's schooling? The analysis and conclusions are based on an intensive study of home-school relationships of children in the first and second grades of a white working-class school and an upper-middle-class school.

I begin the discussion with a very brief review of historical variations in home-school relationships. Then, I describe the research sites and methodology. In the third section, I examine teachers' views of family involvement in schooling. This is followed by a description of family-school interactions in the working-class and middle-class communities. Finally, I analyze the factors contributing to social class variations in home-school relationships and review the implications for future research.

HISTORICAL VARIATIONS IN FAMILY-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

Families and schools are dynamic institutions; both have changed markedly in the last two centuries. Not surprisingly, family-school interactions have shifted as well. Over time, there has been a steady increase in the level of parental involvement in schooling. At least three major stages of family-school interaction can be identified. In the first period, parents in rural areas provided food and shelter for the teacher. Children's education and family life were intertwined, although parents evidently were not involved in the formal aspects of their children's cognitive development (Overstreet and Overstreet 1949). In the second period, marked by the rise of mass schooling, parents provided political and economic support for the selection and maintenance of school sites. Parents were involved in school activities and classroom activities, but again, they were not fundamentally involved in their children's cognitive development (Butterworth 1928; Hymes 1953; National Congress of Parents and Teachers 1944). In the third and current period, parents have increased their efforts to reinforce the curriculum and promote cognitive development at home. In addition, parents have played a growing role in monitoring their children's educational development, particularly in special education programs, and have moved into the classroom as volunteers (Berger 1983; Levy, Meltsner, and Wildavsky 1974; Mehan, Hertweck, and Meihls 1986).

These changes in family-school interactions do not represent a linear progression. Nor is there only one form of relationship at any given time. Many factors—e.g., parents' educational attainment, the amount of nonwork time parents can invest in their children's schooling—affect the kind and degree of parental involvement. Family-school relationships are socially constructed and are historically variable. Home-school partnerships, in which parents are involved in the cognitive development of their children, currently seem to be the dominant model, but there are many possible types of family-school relationships (Baker and Stevenson 1986). As in other social relationships, family-school interactions carry the imprint of the larger social context: Acceptance of a particular type of family-school relationship emerges as the result of social processes.

These aspects of family-school relationships are routinely neglected in social scientists' discussions of parental involvement (Epstein 1983, 1984; Seeley 1984). When home-school

relationships are evaluated exclusively in terms of parental behavior, critical questions are neither asked nor answered. The standards of the schools must be viewed as problematic, and further, the researcher must ask what kinds of social resources are useful in complying with these standards.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research presented here involved participant-observation of two first-grade classrooms located in two different communities. Also, in-depth interviews of parents, teachers, and principals were conducted while the children were in first and second grade. Following other studies of social class differences in family life (Rubin 1976; Kohn 1977), I chose a white working-class community and a professional middle-class community. I sought a working-class community in which a majority of the parents were high school graduates or dropouts, employed in skilled or semiskilled occupations, paid an hourly wage, and periodically unemployed. For the professional middle-class school, I sought a community in which a majority of the parents were college graduates and professionals who had strong career opportunities and who were less vulnerable to changes in the economy. The two communities described here met these criteria.

Colton School (fictitious name) is located in a working-class community. Most of the parents of Colton students are employed in semiskilled or unskilled occupations (see Table 1). School personnel report that most of the parents have a high school education; many are high school dropouts. The school has about 450 students in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade. Slightly over one half of the children are white, one third are Hispanic, and the remainder are black or Asian, especially recent Vietnamese immigrants. About one half of the children qualify for free lunches under federal guidelines.

Prescott School (fictitious name) is in an upper-middle-class suburban community about 30 minutes from Colton. Most of the parents of Prescott students are professionals (Table 1). Both parents in the family are likely to be college graduates, and many of the children's fathers have advanced degrees. The school enrolls about 300 students from kindergarten to fifth grade. Virtually all the students are white, and the school does not offer a lunch program, although the Parents' Club sponsors a Hot Dog Day once a month.

Table 1. The Percentage of Parents in Each Occupational Category, by School

Occupation	Colton	Prescott
Professionals, executives, managers	1	60
Semiprofessionals, sales, clerical workers, and technicians	11	30
Skilled and semiskilled workers	51	9
Unskilled workers (and welfare recipients)	23	1
Unknown	20	—

Source: California Department of Education 1983.
NOTE: The figures for Prescott school are based on the principal's estimation of the school population.

For a six-month period, January to June 1982, I visited one first-grade classroom at each school. My visits averaged once or twice a week per school and lasted around two hours. During this time, I observed the classroom and acted as a volunteer in the class, passing out paper and helping the children with math and spelling problems.

At the end of the school year, I selected six children in each class for further study. The children were selected on the basis of reading-group membership; a boy and a girl were selected from the high, medium, and low reading groups. To prevent the confounding effects of race, I chose only white children. I interviewed one single mother in each school; the remaining households had two parents. In both of the schools, three of the mothers worked full time or part time, and three were at home full time. All of the Colton mothers, however, had worked in recent years, when their children were younger. The Prescott mothers had worked prior to the birth of their children but had not been in the labor force since that time.

When the children finished first grade, I interviewed their mothers individually. When they finished second grade, I interviewed their mothers for a second time, and in separate sessions, I interviewed most of their fathers. I also interviewed the first- and second-grade teachers, the school principals, and a resource specialist at one of the schools. All the interviews were semistructured and lasted about two hours. The interviews were tape recorded, and all participants were promised confidentiality.

TEACHERS' REQUESTS FOR PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The research examined the formal requests from the teachers and school administrators asking parents to participate in schooling, particularly surrounding the issue of achievement. It also studied the quality of interaction between teachers and parents on the school site. Although there were some variations among the teachers in their utilization of parents in the classrooms, all promoted parental involvement and all believed there was a strong relationship between parental involvement (particularly read-

ing to children) and academic performance. At both schools, the definition of the ideal family-school relationship was the same: a partnership in which family life and school life are integrated.

In the course of the school year, teachers in both schools actively promoted parental involvement in schooling in several ways. For example, newsletters were used to notify families of school events and to invite them to attend. Teachers also reminded children verbally about school events to which parents had been invited and encouraged the children to bring their parents to classroom and schoolwide events.

In their interactions with parents, educators urged parents to read to their children. The principal at Prescott school, for example, told the parents at Back to School Night that they should consider reading the child's homework. In every class at Colton school, there was a Read at Home Program, in which the teacher kept track of the number of hours a child read to an adult at home or was read to by a sibling or adult. A chart posted in the classroom marked hours of reading in 15-minute intervals. A child could choose a free book after eight hours of reading at home. This emphasis on reading also surfaced in the routine interactions between parents and teachers and between teachers and children. In the classroom, the teachers suggested that children check out library books, read to their parents, or have their parents read to them at home. At parent-teacher conferences, teachers suggested that parents read to their child at home. In one 20-minute parent-teacher conference, for example, the teacher mentioned five times the importance of reading to the child at home.

Other requests of parents were made as well. Teachers encouraged parents to communicate any concerns they had about their child. In their meetings with parents, teachers also expressed a desire for parents to review and reinforce the material learned in class (e.g., to help their children learn their spelling words). Generally, teachers at both schools believed that the relationship between parental involvement and academic performance was important, and they used a variety of approaches to encourage parents to participate in education.

Teachers and administrators spoke of being "partners" with parents, and they stressed the need to maintain good communication, but it was clear that they desired parents to defer to their professional expertise. For example, a first-grade teacher at Prescott did not believe in assigning homework to the children and did not appreciate parents communicating their displeasure with the policy by complaining repeatedly to the principal. Nor did principals welcome parents' opinions that a teacher was a bad teacher and should be fired. Teachers wanted parents to support them, or as they put it, to "back them up."

Although generally persuaded that parental involvement was positive for educational growth, some teachers, particularly in the upper-middle-class school, were ambivalent about some types of parental involvement in schooling. The Prescott teachers were very concerned that some parents placed too much pressure on their children. Parental involvement could become counterproductive when it increased the child's anxiety level and produced negative learning experiences. As one Prescott teacher put it,

> It depends on the parent. Sometimes it can be helpful, sometimes it creates too much pressure. Sometimes they learn things wrong. It is better for them to leave the basics alone . . . and take them to museums, do science, and other enrichment activities.

As Becker and Epstein (1982) have found, there was some variation among the teachers in the degree to which they took leadership roles in promoting parental involvement in schooling, particularly in the area of classroom volunteers. Although all the teachers in the study requested parents to volunteer and had parents in the classroom, there were other teachers in the school who used parents more extensively. Teachers also varied in how they judged parents. While the extreme cases were clear, the teachers sometimes disagreed about how supportive parents were or about how much pressure they were putting on their children. For example, the first-grade teacher at Prescott thought one boy's father placed too much pressure on him, but the second-grade teacher judged the family to be supportive and helpful. Thus, there were variations in teachers' styles as well as in the way they implemented the model of home-school partnerships.

This study does not, however, support the thesis that the different levels of parental involvement can be traced to institutional differentiation or institutional discrimination, i.e., to teachers' pursuit of different kinds of relationships with working-class and middle-class families (Connell et al. 1982; Epstein and Becker 1982). All of the first- and second-grade teachers in the study made similar requests to parents. In both schools, teachers made clear and repeated efforts to promote parental involvement in the educational process.

Educational Consequences of Family-School Relationships

Parents who agreed with the administrators' and teachers' definition of partnership appeared to offer an educational advantage to their children; parents who turned over the responsi-

bility of education to the professional could negatively affect their child's schooling.

Teachers' methods of presenting, teaching, and assessing subject matter were based on a structure that presumed parents would help children at home. At Colton, for example, spelling words were given out on Monday and students were repeatedly encouraged to practice the words at home with their parents before the test on Friday. Teachers noticed which children had practiced at home and which children had not and believed it influenced their performance.

This help at home was particularly important for low achievers. At Prescott, teachers encouraged parents of low achievers to work with them at home. In one case, a girl missed her spelling lessons because she had to meet with the reading resource teacher. Rather than fall behind in spelling, she and her mother did her spelling at home through most of the year. Colton teachers also tried to involve parents in the education of low achievers. One Colton teacher arranged a special conference at a student's home and requested that the parents urge the student to practice reading at home. The teacher complained that the girl didn't "get that much help at home." The teacher believed that if the parents had taken an active role in schooling, the child would have been promoted rather than retained.

In other instances, the initiative to help children at home came from parents. For example, at Prescott, one mother noticed while volunteering in the classroom that her son was somewhat behind in his spelling. At her request, she and her son worked on his spelling every day after school for about a month, until he had advanced to the lesson that most of the class was on. Prior to the mother's actions, the boy was in the bottom third of the class in spelling. He was not, however, failing spelling, and it was unlikely that the teacher would have requested the parent to take an active role. After the mother and son worked at home, he was in the top third of the class in his spelling work. The teacher was very impressed by these efforts and believed that the mother's active involvement in schooling had a positive effect on her son's performance:

> She is very supportive, very committed. If she didn't work in the class [volunteering] her boys wouldn't do too well. They are not brilliant at all. But they are going to do well. She is just going to see that they are going to get a good foundation. A child like that would flounder if you let him.

Not all parental involvement in schooling was so positive, however. There is a dark side to the partnership, which is not usually addressed in the literature aimed at increasing parental participation in education (Epstein and Becker 1982; Seeley 1984). Particularly in the upper-middle-class school, teachers complained of the pressure parents placed on teachers and children for academic performance. One mother reported that her son had been stealing small objects early in first grade, a pattern the pediatrician and the mother attributed to the boy's "frustration level" in schooling. A girl in the lowest reading group began developing stomach aches during the reading period in first grade. Teachers at Prescott mentioned numerous cases in which parental involvement was unhelpful. In these cases, parents had usually challenged the professional expertise of the teachers.

Generally, however, the teachers believed that the relationship between parental participation and school performance was positive. These results provide indications that teachers take *parental performance* in schooling very seriously. Teachers recall which parents participate and which parents fail to participate in schooling. They believe that their requests of parents are reasonable and that all parents, regardless of social position, can help their children in first and second grade.

PARENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLING

Although teachers at both schools expressed a desire for parental participation in schooling, the amount of contact varied significantly between the sites. The response of parents to teachers' requests was much higher at the upper-middle-class school than at the working-class school.

Attendance at School Events

As Table 2 shows, the level of attendance at formal school events was significantly higher at Prescott than at Colton. Virtually all Prescott parents attended the parent-teacher conferences in the fall and spring, but only 60 percent of Colton parents attended. Attendance at Open House was almost three times higher at Prescott than at Colton.

The difference between the two schools was apparent not only in the quantity of interaction but in the quality of interaction. Although teachers at both schools asked parents to

Table 2. Percentage of Parents Participating in School Activities, by School, First Grade Only, 1981–1982

Activity	Colton ($n = 34$)	Prescott ($n = 28$)
Parent-teacher conferences	60	100
Open house	35	96
Volunteering in classroom	3	43

communicate any concerns they had about their children, Colton parents rarely initiated contact with teachers. When Colton parents did contact the school, they frequently raised nonacademic issues, such as lunchboxes, bus schedules, and playground activities. One of the biggest complaints, for example, was that children had only 15 minutes to eat lunch and that slower eaters were often unable to finish.

At Colton, the interactions between parents and teachers were stiff and awkward. The parents often showed signs of discomfort: nervous shifting, blushing, stuttering, sweating, and generally looking ill at ease. During the Open House, parents wandered around the room looking at the children's pictures. Many of the parents did not speak with the teacher during their visit. When they did, the interaction tended to be short, rather formal, and serious. The teacher asked the parents if they had seen all of their children's work, and she checked to see that all of the children had shown their desk and folder of papers to their parents. The classrooms at Colton often contained only about 10 adults at a time, and the rooms were noticeably quiet.

At Prescott, the interactions between parents and teachers were more frequent, more centered around academic matters, and much less formal. Parents often wrote notes to the teacher, telephoned the teacher at school, or dropped by during the day to discuss a problem. These interactions often centered around the child's academic progress; many Prescott parents monitored their children's education and requested additional resources for them if there were problems. Parents, for example, asked that children be signed up to see the reading resource teacher, be tested by the school psychologist, or be enrolled in the gifted program. Parents also asked for homework for their children or for materials that they could complete at home with their children.

The ease with which Prescott parents contacted the school was also apparent at formal school events. At the Open House, almost all of the parents talked to the teacher or to the teacher's aide; these conversations were often long and were punctuated by jokes and questions. Also, many of the parents were friends with other parents in the class, so there was quite a bit of interaction between families. In inviting me to the Open House, the teacher described the event as a "cocktail party without cocktails." The room did indeed have the noisy, crowded, and animated atmosphere of a cocktail party.

In sum, Colton parents were reluctant to contact the school, tended to intervene over nonacademic matters, and were uncomfortable in their interactions in the school. In contrast, although Prescott parents varied in the level of supervision and scrutiny they gave their child's schooling, they frequently contacted teachers to discuss their child's academic progress.

Parents' attendance at school activities and their contact with teachers enabled the teachers to directly assess parents' compliance with requests for involvement. However, Prescott teachers had difficulty estimating the number of children whose parents read to them at home regularly. The teachers believed that a majority of children were read to several times per week and that many children spent time reading to themselves. Among the six families interviewed, all of the parents said that they read to their children almost every day, usually before bedtime. Colton teachers used the Read at Home Program to evaluate the amount of reading that took place at home. During the participant-observation period, only three or four children in the class of 34 brought back slips every day or every few days demonstrating that they had read at home for at least 15 minutes. Some children checked out books and brought back slips less frequently. The majority of the class earned only two books in the program, indicating that they had read at home an average of 16 hours during the 180 days of school, or between two and four minutes a day.

The Read at Home Program was actively promoted by Colton teachers. Children were brought to the front of the class for applause every time they earned a book, and the teachers encouraged children to check out books and read at home. Nevertheless, in the interviews, only half of the parents said that they read to their children every day; the remainder read to their children much more irregularly. Colton parents clearly did not read to their children as often as the upper-middle-class parents at Prescott.

In addition, Prescott parents played a more active role in reinforcing and monitoring the school work of their children. Colton parents were asked by teachers to help review and reinforce the material at school, particularly spelling words. Though a few parents worked with their children, Colton teachers were disappointed in the response. Colton parents were also unfamiliar with the school's curriculum and with the specific educational problems of their children. Parents of children with learning disabilities, for example, knew only that their children's grades "weren't up to par" or that their children "didn't do too well" in school. Moreover these parents were unaware of the teacher's specific efforts to improve their child's performance.

Prescott parents, on the other hand, carefully followed their children's curriculum. They often showed children the practical applications of the knowledge they gained at school, made up games that strengthened and elaborated chil-

dren's recently acquired knowledge, and reviewed the material presented in class with their children. Parents of low achievers and children with learning problems were particularly vigorous in these efforts and made daily efforts to work with children at home. Parents knew their child's specific problems and knew what the teacher was doing to strengthen their child's performance. Parents' efforts on behalf of their children were closely coordinated with the school program.

There were some variations in parents' response to teachers' requests in the two school communities. Notably, two of the Colton parents (who appeared to be upwardly mobile) actively read to their children at home, closely reviewed their children's school work, and emphasized the importance of educational success. The teachers were very impressed by the behavior of these parents and by the relatively high academic performance of their children. At Prescott, parents differed in how critically they assessed the school and in their propensity to intervene in their children's schooling. For example, some parents said that they "felt sorry for teachers" and believed that other parents in the community were too demanding. The child's number of siblings, birth order, and temperament also shaped parental intervention in schooling. There was some variation in the role of fathers, although in both schools, mothers had the primary responsibility for schooling.

There were important differences, then, in the way in which Colton and Prescott parents responded to teachers' requests for participation. These patterns suggest that the relationship between families and schools was *independent* in the working-class school, and *interdependent* in the middle-class school.

FACTORS STRUCTURING PARENTS' PARTICIPATION

Interviews and observations of parents suggested that a variety of factors influenced parents' participation in schooling. Parents' educational capabilities, their view of the appropriate division of labor between teachers and parents, the information they had about their children's schooling, and the time, money, and other material resources available in the home all mediated parents' involvement in schooling.

Educational Capabilities

Parents at Colton and Prescott had different levels of educational attainment. Most Colton parents were high school graduates or high school dropouts. Most were married and had their first child shortly after high school. They generally had difficulties in school as children; several of the fathers, for example, had been held back in elementary school. In interviews, they expressed doubts about their educational capabilities and indicated that they depended on the teacher to educate their children. As one mother stated,

> I know that when she gets into the higher grades, I know I won't be able to help her, math especially, unless I take a refresher course myself. . . . So I feel that it is the teacher's job to help her as much as possible to understand it, because I know that I won't be able to.

Another mother, commenting on her overall lack of educational skills, remarked that reading preschool books to her young son had improved her reading skills:

> I graduated from high school and could fill out [job] applications, but when I was nineteen and married my husband, I didn't know how to look up a word in the dictionary. When I started reading to Johnny, I found that *my* reading improved.

Observations of Colton parents at the school site and in interviews confirmed that parents' educational skills were often wanting. Prescott parents' educational skills, on the other hand, were strong. Most were college graduates and many had advanced degrees.

Parents in the two communities also divided up the responsibility between home and school in different ways. Colton parents regarded teachers as "educated people." They turned over the responsibility for education to the teacher, whom they viewed as a professional. As one mother put it,

> My job is here at home. My job is to raise him, to teach him manners, get him dressed and get him to school, to make sure that he is happy. Now her [the teacher's] part, the school's part, is to teach him to learn. Hopefully, someday he'll be able to use all of that. That is what I think is their part, to teach him to read, the writing, any kind of schooling.

Education is seen as a discrete process that takes place on the school grounds, under the direction of a teacher. This mother's role is to get her son to school; once there, his teacher will "teach him to learn."

This mother was aware that her son's teacher wanted him to practice reading at home, but neither she nor her husband read to their son regularly. The mother's view of reading was analogous to her view of work. She sent her children to school to learn for six hours a day and expected that they could leave their schooling (i.e., their work) behind them at the

school site, unless they had been given homework. She believed that her seven-year-old boy's afternoons and evenings were time for him to play. In this context, her son's reading at home was similar to riding his bike or to playing with his truck. The mother did not believe that her child's academic progress depended upon his activities at home. Instead, she saw a separation of spheres.

Other parents had a different conception of their role in schooling. They believed education was a shared responsibility: They were *partners* with teachers in promoting their children's academic progress. As one mother stated,

> I see the school as being a very strong instructional force, more so than we are here at home. I guess that I am comfortable with that, from what I have seen. It is a three-to-one ratio or something, where out of a possible four, he is getting three quarters of what he needs from the school, and then a quarter of it from here. Maybe it would be better if our influence was stronger, but I am afraid that in this day and age it is not possible to do any more than that even if you wanted to.

Prescott parents wanted to be involved in their child's educational process in an important way. In dividing up the responsibility for education, they described the relationship between parents and teachers as a relationship between equals, and they believed that they possessed similar or superior educational skills and prestige. One Prescott father discussed his relationship with teachers in this way:

> I don't think of teachers as more educated than me or in a higher position than me. I don't have any sense of hierarchy. I am not higher than them, and they are not higher than me. We are equals. We are reciprocals. So if I have a problem I will talk to them. I have a sense of decorum. I wouldn't go busting into a classroom and say something. . . . They are not working for me, but they also aren't doing something I couldn't do. It is more a question of a division of labor.

Prescott parents had not only better educational skills and higher occupational status than Colton parents but also more disposable income and more flexible work schedules. These material resources entered into the family-school relationships. Some Colton mothers, for example, had to make a series of complicated arrangements for transportation and child care to attend a school event held in the middle of the afternoon. Prescott parents, on the other hand, had two cars and sufficient resources to hire babysitters and housecleaners. In addition, Prescott parents generally had much greater flexibility in their work schedules than Colton parents. Material resources also influenced the educational purchases parents made. Colton parents reported that most of the books they bought for their children came from the flea market. Prescott parents had the financial flexibility to purchase new books if they desired, and many of the parents of low achievers hired tutors for their children during the summer months.

Information about Schooling

Colton parents had only limited information about most aspects of their children's experience at school; what they did know, they learned primarily from their children. For example, the Colton mothers knew the names of the child's teacher and the teacher's aide, the location of the classroom on the school grounds, and the name of the janitor, and they were familiar with the Read at Home Program. They did not know details of the school or of classroom interaction. The amount of information Colton parents had did not seem to vary by how much contact they had with the school.

In the middle-class community, parents had extensive information about classroom and school life. For example, in addition to knowing the names of their child's current classroom teacher and teacher's aide, the mothers knew the names and academic reputations of most of the other teachers in the school. The mothers also knew the academic rankings of children in the class (e.g., the best boy and girl in math, the best boy and girl in reading). Most of the mothers knew the composition of their child's reading group, the math and spelling packet the child was working on, and the specific academic problems to which the child was being exposed (e.g., adding single-digit numbers). Other details of classroom experience were also widely known, including the names of children receiving the services of the reading resource specialist, occupational therapist, and special education teacher. Although a few fathers had very specific information about the school, most depended on their wives to collect and store this information. The fathers were, however, generally apprised of the reputations of teachers and the dissatisfactions that some parents had with particular teachers.

Much of the observed difference between the schools in parents' information about schooling may be traced to differences in family life, particularly in social networks and childrearing patterns. Prescott families saw relatively little of their relatives; instead, many parents socialized with other parents in the school community. Colton parents generally had very close ties with relatives in the area, seeing siblings or parents

three times per week or more. Colton parents had virtually no social contact with other parents in the school, even when the families lived on the same street. The social networks of the middle-class parents provided them with additional sources of information about their child's school experience; the networks of working-class parents did not (see Bott 1971; Litwack and Szeleny 1971).

The childrearing patterns of the two groups also differed, particularly in the leisure time activities they encouraged. At Colton, children's after-school activities were informal: bike riding, snake hunting, watching television, playing with neighbor children, and helping parents with younger siblings. Prescott children were enrolled in formal socialization activities, including swimming lessons, soccer, art and crafts lessons, karate lessons, and gymnastics. All the children in the classroom were enrolled in at least one after-school activity, and many were busy every afternoon with a lesson or structured experience. The parents took their children to and from these activities. Many stayed to watch the lesson, thus providing another opportunity to meet and interact with other Prescott parents. Discussions about schools, teachers' reputations, and academic progress were frequent. For many parents, these interactions were a major source of information about their children's schooling, and parents believed that the discussions had an important effect on the way in which they approached their children's schooling.

DISCUSSION

Teachers in both schools interpreted parental involvement as a reflection of the value parents placed on their children's educational success (see Deutsch 1967; Strodbeck 1958). As the principal at Prescott commented,

> This particular community is one with a very strong interest in its schools. It is a wonderful situation in which to work. Education is very important to the parents and they back that up with an interest in volunteering. This view that education is important helps kids as well. If parents value schooling and think it is important, then kids take it seriously.

The teachers and the principal at Colton placed a similar interpretation on the lack of parental participation at the school. Speaking of the parents, the principal remarked,

> They don't value education because they don't have much of one themselves. [Since] they don't value education as much as they could, they don't put those values and expectations on their kids.

Interviews and observations of parents told a different story, however. Parents in both communities valued educational success; all wanted their children to do well in school, and all saw themselves as supporting and helping their children achieve success at school. Middle- and working-class parents' aspirations differed only in the level of achievement they hoped their children would attain. Several Colton parents were high school dropouts and bitterly regretted their failure to get a diploma. As one mother said, "I desperately want her to graduate. If she can do that, that will satisfy me." All of the Prescott parents hoped that their children would get a college diploma, and many spoke of the importance of an advanced degree.

Although the educational values of the two groups of parents did not differ, the ways in which they promoted educational success did. In the working-class community, parents turned over the responsibility for education to the teacher. Just as they depended on doctors to heal their children, they depended on teachers to educate them. In the middle-class community, however, parents saw education as a shared enterprise and scrutinized, monitored, and supplemented the school experience of their children. Prescott parents read to their children, initiated contact with teachers, and attended school events more often than Colton parents.

Generally, the evidence demonstrates that the level of parental involvement is linked to the class position of the parents and to the social and cultural resources that social class yields in American society. By definition, the educational status and material resources of parents increase with social class. These resources were observed to influence parental participation in schooling in the Prescott and Colton communities. The working-class parents had poor educational skills, relatively lower occupational prestige than teachers, and limited time and disposable income to supplement and intervene in their children's schooling. The middle-class parents, on the other hand, had educational skills and occupational prestige that matched or surpassed that of teachers; they also had the necessary economic resources to manage the child care, transportation, and time required to meet with teachers, to hire tutors, and to become intensely involved in their childrens' schooling.

These differences in social, cultural, and economic resources between the two sets of parents help explain differences in their responses to a variety of teacher requests to participate in schooling. For example, when asked to read to their children and to help them at home with school work, Colton parents were reluctant to comply because they felt that their educational skills were inadequate for these tasks. Prescott parents, with their superior

educational skills, felt more comfortable helping their children in these areas. Parents at Colton and Prescott also differed in their perceptions of the appropriate relationship between parents and teachers. Prescott parents conceived of schooling as a partnership in which parents have the right and the responsibility to raise issues of their choosing and even to criticize teachers. Colton parents' inferior educational level and occupational prestige reinforced their trust in and dependence on the professional expertise of educators. The relatively high occupational position of Prescott parents contributed to their view of teachers as equals.[1] Prescott parents occasionally had more confidence in their right to monitor and to criticize teachers. Their occupational prestige levels may have helped both build this confidence and demystify the status of the teacher as a professional.

Finally, more straightforward economic differences between the middle- and working-class parents are evident in their different responses to requests to attend school events. Attendance at parent-teacher conferences, particularly those held in the afternoon, requires transportation, child care arrangements, and flexibility at the workplace—all more likely to be available to Prescott parents than to Colton parents.

The literature on family life indicates that social class is associated with differences in social networks, leisure time, and childrearing activities (Bott 1971; Kohn 1977; Rubin 1976). The observations in this study confirm these associations and, in addition, indicate that social class differences in family life (or class cultures) have implications for family-school relationships. Middle-class culture provides parents with more information about schooling and promotes social ties among parents in the school community. This furthers the interdependence between home and school. Working-class culture, on the other hand, emphasizes kinship and promotes independence between the spheres of family life and schooling.

Because both schools promote a family-school relationship that solicits parental involvement in schooling and that promotes an interdependence between family and school, the class position and the class culture of middle-class families yield a social profit not available to working-class families. In particular, middle-class culture provides parents with more information about schooling and also builds social networks among parents in the school community. Parents use this information to build a family-school relationship congruent with the schools' definition of appropriate behavior. For example, they may request additional educational resources for their children, monitor the behavior of the teacher, share costs of a tutor with other interested parents, and consult with other parents and teachers about their children's educational experience.

It is important to stress that if the schools were to promote a different type of family-school relationship, the class culture of middle-class parents might not yield a social profit. The data do not reveal that the social relations of middle-class culture are intrinsically better than the social relations of working-class culture. Nor can it be said that the family-school relationships in the middle class are objectively better for children than those in the working class. Instead, the social profitability of middle-class arrangements is tied to the schools' definition of the proper family-school relationship.

Future research on parental participation in education should take as problematic the standards that schools establish for parental involvement in schooling and should focus on the role of class cultures in facilitating and impeding compliance with these standards. In addition, research might profitably examine the role of social class in structuring the conflict between the universalistic concerns of the teacher and the particularistic agenda of parents (Waller 1932; McPherson 1972). Parents and teachers may be "natural enemies" (Waller 1932) and may face enduring problems of negotiating "boundaries" between their "territories" (Lightfoot 1978). Social class appears to influence the educational, status, monetary, and informational resources that each side brings to that conflict.

Family-School Relationships and Cultural Capital

These results suggest that social class position and class culture become a form of cultural capital in the school setting (Bourdieu 1977*a*; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Although working-class and middle-class parents share a desire for their children's educational success in first and second grade, social location leads them to construct different pathways for realizing that success. Working-class parents' method—dependence on the teacher to educate their child—may have been the dominant method of promoting school success in earlier periods within the middle class. Today, however, teachers actively solicit parents' participation in education. Middle-class parents, in supervising, monitoring, and overseeing the educational experience of their children, behave in ways that mirror the requests of schools. This appears to provide middle-class

[1] Some Prescott parents, however, did report that they felt intimidated by a teacher on some occasions.

children with educational advantages over working-class children.

The behavior of parents in this regard is not fully determined by their social location. There are variations within as well as between social classes. Still, parents approach the family-school relationship with different sets of social resources. Schools ask for very specific types of behavior from all parents, regardless of their social class. Not all cultural resources are equally valuable, however, for complying with schools' requests. The resources tied directly to social class (e.g., education, prestige, income) and certain patterns of family life (e.g., kinship ties, socialization patterns, leisure activities) seem to play a large role in facilitating the participation of parents in schools. Other aspects of class and class cultures, including religion and taste in music, art, food, and furniture (Bourdieu 1984) appear to play a smaller role in structuring the behavior of parents, children, and teachers in the family-school relationship. (These aspects of class cultures might, of course, influence other dimensions of schooling.)

These findings underline the importance of studying the significance of cultural capital within a social context. In recent years, Bourdieu has been criticized for being overly deterministic in his analysis of the role of cultural capital in shaping outcomes (Giroux 1983; Connell et al. 1982). Connell et al., for example, argue that cultural capital

> practically obliterates the person who is actually the main constructor of the home/school relationship. The student is treated mainly as a bearer of cultural capital, a bundle of abilities, knowledges and attitudes furnished by parents. [p. 188]

Moreover, Bourdieu has focused almost exclusively on the social profits stemming from high culture. Although he is quite clear about the arbitrary character of culture, his emphasis on the value of high culture could be misinterpreted, His research on the cultural capital of elites may be construed as suggesting that the culture of elites is intrinsically more valuable than that of the working class. In this regard, the concept of cultural capital is potentially vulnerable to the same criticisms that have been directed at the notion of the culture of poverty (Valentine 1968).

This study highlights the need for more extensive research in the area of cultural capital. It would be particularly useful for future research to take into account historical variations in definitions of cultural capital. Family-school relationships have changed over time; what constitutes cultural capital at one point in time may or may not persist in a future period. Historical studies help reveal the way in which cultural resources of social groups are unevenly valued in a society; these studies help illustrate the dynamic character of these value judgments. Historical work on definitions of cultural capital can also shed light on the arbitrariness of the current social standards.

In addition, research on cultural capital could fruitfully expand its focus to include more social groups. The research on high culture (Bourdieu 1977*a*, 1977*b*; DiMaggio and Useem 1982; Cookson and Persell 1985) has made a useful contribution to the field (see also Lamont and Lareau 1987). This study, however, suggests that middle-class families have cultural resources that become a form of cultural capital in specific settings. In moving beyond studies of elites, it might be useful to recognize that all social groups have cultural capital and that some forms of this capital are valued more highly by the dominant institutions at particular historical moments. As Samuel Kaplan (pers. comm. 1986) points out, members of the working class have cultural capital as well, but it is only rarely recognized by dominant social institutions. During World War II, for example, the dangerous and difficult task of the marksman was usually filled by working-class youths; only rarely was it assigned to a college boy. Marksman skills and, more generally, compliance with the expectations of supervising officers are important in the military. Here, the childrearing values of working-class parents (e.g., obedience, conformity) may advantage working-class youths; the values of middle-class families (e.g., self-direction, autonomy, and permissiveness) may disadvantage middle-class youth (Kohn 1977; Kohn and Schooler 1983).

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Educators and policymakers may seek to increase parental involvement in schooling by boosting the educational capabilities and information resources of parents. For sociologists interested in family, schools, and social stratification, a somewhat different task is in order. Families and schools, and family-school relationships, are critical links in the process of social reproduction. For most children (but not all), social class is a major predictor of educational and occupational achievement. Schools, particularly elementary and secondary schools, play a crucial role in this process of social reproduction; they sort students into social categories that award credentials and opportunities for mobility (Collins 1979, 1981*c*). We know relatively little about the stages of this social process.

The concept of cultural capital may help by turning our attention to the structure of opportunity and to the way in which individuals proceed

through that structure (see also Collins 1981*a*, 1981*b*; Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981). Moreover, the concept does not overlook the importance of the role of the individual in constructing a biography within a social structure. Class provides social and cultural resources, but these resources must be invested or activated to become a form of cultural capital. Analyzing the role of cultural capital in structuring family-school relationships, particularly parental participation in education, provides a rich setting for analyzing the linkages between micro and macro levels of analysis.

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