Idealistic, Fatalistic and Co-opted Perspectives: Views Surrounding the Disparities of Educational Collaborations

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Idealistic, Fatalistic, and Co-opted Perceptions: Views Surrounding the Disparities of Educational Collaborations in Low-Income Urban Areas

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Foundations of education faculty and their students have examined and dialogued about the power differentials that exist in schools—particularly those found in the relationships between administrators and teachers, between teachers and students, and between students of different socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Part of this examination also has focused on the power differentials that at times exist between school faculty and families of students, as well as between schools and surrounding communities. These power differentials appear to be particularly heightened in low-income urban areas where the perspectives and experiences of the different participants differ remarkably with regard to social, political, economic, and cultural circumstances.

There are numerous reasons why it is critical to understand and recognize the power differentials that
exist between these groups. They can lead to the identification of diverse world view points, as well as give strength to the alternative realities and perspectives of the different people who are connected to schools. They provide notice of how differences, such as race, gender, socioeconomic status and culture, are a part of the power discrepancies that formulate between these groups. Reflection on these discrepancies also can lead to and provide documentation of the consequences of the inequalities in these relationships, particularly as they relate to schooling.

Yet another compelling reason, and at times increasingly spotlighted reason, why these power differentials or inequalities in these relationships are important to understand is because educational institutions are encouraged to engage in collaborative undertakings with such diverse groups in efforts to support the social and academic development of children. Though it is difficult to precisely define collaborative undertakings, it is hoped that through these efforts a web of support will be provided for children who increasingly are developing in vulnerable circumstances due to family fragmentation and isolation, increased parental employment responsibilities, poverty, and accompanying situations. Indeed, Cordiero and Kolek (1996) noted, "The unifying purpose that prompts schools, people, and organizations to collaborate in educational partnerships is best depicted by the now much quoted African proverb 'It takes a village to raise a child'" (p.4). To further speak to the widespread recognition and proliferation of these efforts, Wang and Boyd (2000) noted that, "Communities across the country are engaged in collaborative efforts to help young people learn and develop other important skills and competencies they need to succeed, now and throughout life" (p. vii).

This paper continues the dialogue undertaken by foundations of education faculty and others by examining the inequities in the relationships between schools and associated groups. Specifically, this paper explores the movement to foster educational collaborations of families, schools, and community institutions, particularly as they occur in low-income urban areas, and proceeds to discuss the disparities and inequalities that often are intrinsic to the different working groups of these partnerships, noting the voice and position of families in these efforts, and concludes with a theoretical discussion of the perceptions that are attached to these inequalities. Identification of inequalities in these collaborative efforts may spark diverse dialogues. Some advocates may question the purpose of focusing on the disparities of these initiatives, rather than on the beneficial aspects. Skeptics or detractors of these efforts may focus on the inequalities that are intrinsic to these partnerships solely as a means to maintain the status quo, or to assure that power remains in the hands of those who hold it. Nonetheless, in this paper it is argued that it may not be wise to engage in dualistic, either/or thinking about these efforts, or to place these educational collaborations in distinct categories that belie the intricacies of these initiatives. Bringing diverse groups together to support children is a complex and involved undertaking. Reflecting on these efforts from different perspectives, particularly with regard to their existing inequities, may provide a
Foundation to envisioning and fostering the social conditions through which more equitable educational collaborations are fostered. It is from this foundation that the more pragmatic task of developing equitable educational collaborations may be undertaken.

**Family, School, Community Collaborations in Urban Areas**

Notably, school collaborations are advocated in all areas; rural, suburban and urban. To some degree, however, there seems to be a particularly strong call for these collaborative efforts in urban areas. For example, Carol Ascher (1994) suggested that connections between teachers and parents of poor and minority students should be fostered to benefit children’s learning. Ascher (1994), likewise, noted that the mutuality of this contact “appears to be an important key to its success” (p. 369). Burnett (1994) also has advocated for educational partnerships in urban regions, particularly as they relate to school-linked services:

Increasingly, teachers in urban schools across the United States are finding themselves at the center of a vast web of interconnected social problems. Far from being able to concentrate on the singular task of educating their students, teachers are also being called upon to act as brokers for a diverse array of social and health services...While urban teachers obviously cannot provide these services themselves, they can play a major role in building and maintaining partnerships and linkages with the outside social service agencies that are able to deliver them. (p. 1)

Researchers and practitioners often have focused on the environment of inner city neighborhoods and have asserted that it necessitates these partnerships (Anyon, 1997, pp.168-170; Ascher, 1988, p. 2; Burnett, 1994, p.1; Manning & Rodriguez, 2000, pp.21-22). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, inner city neighborhoods are marked by racial segregation, low-wage work, joblessness and concentrated poverty (Wilson, 1996). Inner city neighborhoods in Northeastern and mid-Western areas, for example, have been shaped by increased migration of African American and Latino families since World War II, while simultaneously experiencing white flight. Urban areas also experienced a tremendous decline in industrial jobs, while experiencing an increase in employment that focuses on the production of information, employment requiring higher education levels. These practices and transformations have contributed to increased segregation and poverty in inner city neighborhoods (Katz, 1995; Wilson, 1996). Subsequently, a substantial number of inner city children attend school that have needs related to health, housing and safety issues, that go beyond, but affect, academic performance. Many schools in inner city neighborhoods also are in a deteriorated state (Kozol, 1991). Indeed, Anyon (1997) noted that urban schools are funded at a lower rate than suburban schools. Subsequently, urban schools increasingly explore and implement efforts that foster collaborative undertakings with families and community institutions to support the development of children.
Envisioned Potential of Family, School, Community Collaborations

Advocates of these collaborative efforts recognize the different institutions that influence a child’s social and academic development. Likewise, they understand that these influences are likely to be stronger and more positive when there is cooperation and collaboration among the different parts. For example, it often is asserted that schools and families should work together to bridge the home and school worlds of children (Ascher, 1994; Liontos, 1991). These linkages are particularly critical in inner city neighborhoods where the economic and cultural differences of urban children historically have been ignored and devalued, and a common culture of schooling imposed. Similarly, schools and community institutions should work together to provide support and services to children and their families who will benefit from such assistance (Abdal-Haqq, 1993; Ascher, 1988, p. 5, 1990; Davies, 1996, p. 3; Dryfoos, 1994; Epstein, 1995; Heath & McLaughlin, 1987; Kunesh & Farley, 1993; Liontos, 1991; Wang & Boyd, 2000). Indeed, the relationships between families, schools and community institutions may be conceptualized as overlapping spheres of influence that shape a child’s potential social and academic development (Epstein, 1995, p. 702).

Realities of Family, School, Community Collaborations

However, while ideally the outcomes of such collaborative efforts are promising, the realities of these initiatives often differ a great deal. Research has suggested that the relationships between the participating groups often are marked by inequalities which form barriers to fostering successful partnerships (Ascher, 1994; de Carvalho, 2001; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Kolodny, 2001) These parties typically do not interact on an equal basis in terms of influence and decision making potential. To begin to understand the inequalities that characterize these partnerships, we first examine the nature of the relationships between the participating groups in family, school, community collaborations. These include the family-school relations and school-community institution/interagency relations. Though less research has explored family-community institution relations and how these existing relationships may affect urban educational restructuring that fosters connections to the wider community, these, too, are important associations to understand. If community institutions, particularly community agencies and organizations, are to engage in successful collaborations with schools, it is critical that they be able to work with the children and families affiliated with these institutions.

Family-School Relations

Family-school relations typically have been promoted to “increase in-home support for educational goals and activities, as well as make school personnel more sensitive to the realities of the family” (Heath & McLaughlin, 1987, p. 577).
Parental/family involvement in schools often has taken the form of homework helper, home visitor programs to provide special help for families, reporting of pupil achievement by teachers to families, parent volunteering in schools, participation in Parent Advisory Committees, involvement in search committees and school policy boards, the distribution of communication vehicles such as newsletters, and citizen advocacy projects in which parents representing special interests organize to advance their causes (Davies, 1987, pp.148-153). As admirable as the goals of enhancing family-schools relations appear, the associations between these groups often have not been balanced in terms of power and authority, particularly in low-income urban areas. For example, school personnel often arrange and determine the times for meetings with families, set the tone for these interactions and establish agendas (Henry, 1996, p.5). School personnel determine the types of parental involvement that will be initiated and how they will be coordinated. Indeed, Davies (1987) asserted, “Most of these activities involve initiative by teachers and principals and coordination by the school” (p. 149). Whereas educators may believe that they enthusiastically welcome various types of family involvement in schools, implicitly or explicitly, families are expected to defer to the professional expertise of school staff (Lareau & Horvat, 1999, p. 37). Though research also has suggested that variations exist in the leadership roles that teachers and schools formulate with regard to promoting family-school relationships (Epstein, 1986; 1988, p. 58). Likewise, family-school relations tend to vary across grade levels, unless efforts are undertaken to develop appropriate partnership practices for each grade (Epstein, 1995, p. 703).

Research has suggested that middle class families tend to view children’s educational experiences as a shared responsibility of the home and school (Lareau, 1987). This may be because the culture of schools is based upon the culture of the upper and middle classes. Subsequently, though schools often coordinate family-school interactions, the associations of middle class families with schools are more frequent, at times informal, and often viewed as a relationship among equals. For example, in researching the differences in family-school relations in white working class and middle class communities, Lareau (1987) noted, “In the middle class community...parents saw education as a shared enterprise and scrutinized, monitored and supplemented the school experience of children” (p. 81). Such research draws attention to the continuity that often exists between the goals of schools and those of middle class families.

Other families, particularly low-income urban families, often interact with schools from a more fragile and less equitable position. This is reflective of the powerful structural and societal forces that have shaped the experiences and circumstances of these families, as well as their interactions with social institutions. Lareau (1987, p. 74), for example, drew upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977; Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977) and noted that the cultural capital that is employed by schools - particular linguistic structures, authority patterns and types of curricula - often differs
from what is utilized by low-income families. These differences often create discomfort for low-income parents in interacting with school staff, subsequently hindering true collaborative efforts. Lareau’s insightful research draws attention to the idea that all individuals have capital to invest or activate in a variety of social settings. However, not all social and cultural capital has the same value in a given field. De Carvalho (2001, p. 6), also reflecting on the existing discrepancies in cultural capital between schools and some families, suggested that when mandatory family-school relations are promoted, it may result in cultural imposition of families.

To further speak to the inequities that may formulate in family-school relations in urban areas, Ogbu’s (1974) research suggested that urban families may feel insecure and ambivalent when interacting with schools. This relates to previous negative schooling experiences on the part of the parents. Ogbu, for example, conducted an ethnographic study of the schooling experiences of children and families in an urban neighborhood in Stockton, California. In this particular neighborhood, with a large population of black and Mexican-American families, Ogbu found that many parents were bitter towards an educational system that they believed did not serve to benefit them socially and academically on an equal basis with whites. In his study, Ogbu suggested that there are differences between how subordinate minorities, groups such as blacks and Mexican Americans who were incorporated into the United States against their will, and immigrant minorities, groups who come to the United States for economic betterment or asylum, perceive school experiences and their relations with these institutions. Subordinate minorities see school discrimination as institutionalized practices, whereas immigrant minorities see it as a temporary barrier that can be overcome. Immigrant minorities remember their situations, including their schooling experiences in their native lands, and use such information to rationalize and acquiesce to prejudice. Ogbu found that subordinate minorities were not as likely to rationalize prejudice, subsequently influencing their relationships with schools.

In a more recent study, Lareau and Horvat (1999), echoing some aspects of the research conducted by Ogbu (1974), also suggested that race has a significant role in shaping family-school relationships, particularly as it relates to a historical legacy of discrimination for black families. Likewise, they point to the role of class in shaping family-school relations.

Many black parents, given the historical legacy of racial discrimination in schools, cannot presume or trust that their children will be treated fairly in school. Yet, they encounter rules of the game in which educators define desirable family-school relationships as based on trust, partnership, cooperation, and deference. These rules are more difficult for black than white parents to comply with. Furthermore, although race has an independent role, class also makes a difference. Thus, middle-class black parents have access to important forms of cultural capital, just as middle-class white parents do. (p. 42)
In this particular study, Lareau and Horvat noted that both white and black middle class families, more than low-income families, were able to maneuver their children’s schooling experiences because of the activation of their social and cultural capital. Such research offers powerful insights into the existing fragile relationships between low-income urban families and schools. As race and class influence educational inequities in urban areas, they, likewise, are a part of the disparities that form in family-school relations.

At times low-income urban families do not participate in school meetings and/or respond to requests by teachers. Parental involvement is seen to be lacking. Often, families are accused of not caring about the education of their children. Indeed, Lightfoot (1978) noted that “It seems much easier and less threatening to define the inadequacies of the dyadic and individualistic relationships between mother and child than to question the inequities and injustices of society” (p. 13). Yet, such perspectives do not acknowledge the lived realities of urban families. Urban families often are confronted with barriers related to employment, transportation, child care and language issues (Ascher, 1994, p. 362). An increasing number of single parent families are raising children, which also shapes family-school relations (Ascher, 1994, p. 362; de Carvalho, 2001, p. 15; Epstein, 1988, p. 58). Indeed, Ascher (1994) suggested that “knowledge of the changing urban family can...explain the difficulty of generating parent involvement, and may enable educators to plan more effectively for increasing this involvement” (p. 361). Yet, often pathological views are attached to families if school participation is lacking, which in turn may be noted to be reflective of the power discrepancies that exist between schools and surrounding urban communities.

Conversely research has suggested that, at times, urban families’ interactions with schools are more frequent (Gotts & Purnell, 1987). Notably, however, these interactions usually relate to issues regarding their children’s behavior which, too, may foster uneasy relations with schools. Gotts and Purnell (1987), for example, in a study of parent involvement in 17 communities in a seven-state region served by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory noted that, “Urban teachers more than the others [rural, small town] interacted with parents concerning matters of student behavior and discipline” (p. 213). Such interactions may foster defensiveness on the part of parents, subsequently hindering collaborative interactions. When defensiveness or hostility is perceived by teachers in family-school interactions, teachers subsequently may believe that some families are uncooperative and difficult.

Compelling research has suggested that positive family-school relations can be fostered in all settings (Epstein, 1995). Yet it also has suggested that parental/family involvement that is initiated in schools has been conceived from a middle class perspective and can increase the advantages of middle-class parents and families. However, it may not sufficiently address the experiences and circumstances of low-income urban families. Davies (1987), for example, asserted that policies need to be adopted to reduce, rather than reproduce, existing inequities:
There is ample evidence that poor people can organize effectively and affect public policies, and learn how to get information, to process it, and make wise decisions. Poor and minority parents can develop the competence and confidence needed to participate effectively in any of the forms of participation [of parental involvement]. But, society must have the political will to invest the time, money, and effort needed and to adopt policies that recognize social class inequities in order to intervene so that parent involvement plans do not, in fact, serve to reproduce rather than reduce existing inequities. (p. 156)

Lightfoot (1978), too, suggested that it is critical to consider family-school relations in a broader context.

As long as teachers cling to the ideal middle-class images of family, they will not be able to search for constructive alliances with the great majority of families who do not match those images. (pp. 14-15)

Because the experiences and circumstances of low-income urban families often are not adequately addressed in these educational partnerships, inequalities in these relationships are fostered.

School-Community Institution/Interagency Relations

The relationships between schools and community institutions also are critical to explore and understand when fostering educational collaborations in urban areas. Urban schools form collaborations with a variety of community institutions to bring together diverse resources that may be utilized to support the development of children, as well as to prepare them for future life experiences. Businesses, for example, often join in educational collaborations to help prepare young people for participation in the work force. Institutions of higher education also work with schools in collaborative efforts to help improve teaching approaches and curricula, often through pre-service training, teacher education programs and professional development schools. These types of educational collaborations have been extensively studied, including an exploration of the differing ideologies, norms, and inequities that are inherent to these efforts (see for example Ascher, 1988; Boyles, 2001; Restine, 1996). Boyles (2001), for example, warned that though school-business collaborations appear to benefit both parties, these collaborations actually are exploitative of schools. He suggested that the benefits of these partnerships actually are for businesses, as they push uncritical consumerism through these efforts.

Of particular interest also are the relationships that urban schools form with community agencies and organizations for reasons relating to the social needs that children bring with them to their educational settings (Abdal-Haqq, 1993; Ascher, 1988, p. 5, 1990; Davies, 1996, p. 3; Dryfoos, 1994; Epstein, 1995; Heath & McLaughlin, 1987; Kunesh & Farley, 1993; Liontos, 1992; Wang & Boyd, 2000). Such collaborations may be described as school-linked or school-based services. Dryfoos (1994), likewise, has advocated for these partnerships in the form of full-
service schools. They also may function as part of interagency efforts. Schools appear to be natural institutions with which to form these linkages, because attendance at school is required for children (Ascher, 1990, p. 1).

The relationships between schools and such community institutions appear to be on a more equitable standing, than the associations between schools and families. This may be because schools and many community agencies and organizations are institutions that project middle-class values and share a common goal of providing services of various types. Some research also has suggested that schools may “play it safe” by working with more traditional agencies, than with activist, flexible, grass-roots organizations (Ascher, 1988, p. 15). Nonetheless, at times power issues also may arise in the relations between schools and community institutions. For example, some school personnel, such as guidance counselors and nurses, may resist working with staff from community agencies and organizations out of fear for their own job security (Ascher, 1990, p. 2). In other circumstances, some staff from community agencies and organizations may at times resist working with schools because they believe they are difficult institutions to navigate. They may believe that established school practices and regulations will work against collaborative efforts. In some cases, this negatively shapes the effectiveness of collaborative efforts.

When schools participate in interagency efforts, they also may be exposed to power issues that arise due to control matters. Political compromises may be undertaken to insure the protection of individual agencies in collaborative efforts. Power struggles also may center on the amount of time, funds and personnel some agencies contribute to cooperative efforts in relation to others. Research has suggested that these initiatives often require continuous effort to assure the success of these undertakings (Melaville & Blank, 2000, p. 9).

Notably, however, when school-community institution or interagency partnerships are fostered, it is the voice of families that at times is overlooked and/or excluded in these undertakings. For example, school staff may develop linkages with a local health center. Yet, in forming these linkages the input of families may not be sought. Some researchers and practitioners have suggested that it is critical to maintain the voices of families in the development of these partnerships. Ascher (1988), for example, noted:

[In] giving parents a more active role, will the reforms really take place. From this perspective, collaborations that only reinforce the powerlessness of parents, or even those that build alternative groups to whom the schools are accountable, must in some way be self-defeating. (p. 16)

School-community institution and interagency efforts also may result in the increased management and surveillance of families. Capper, Hanson and Huilman (1994), for example, examined a community-based interagency effort in a Midwestern city from different perspectives, including poststructuralist perspectives. In referring to poststructuralist perspectives, Capper, Hanson and Huilman noted
that a purpose of poststructural perspectives is to deconstruct and take apart structural functional and interpretive views, as well as emancipatory perspectives (p. 338). Likewise, the notion of power is examined as a central construct, as power circulates throughout relations among people and in interactions. In this particular study, Capper, Hanson, and Huilman noted that from poststructuralist perspectives, resident lives became more open to scrutiny by interagency team members as residents and team members participated in interagency planning meetings. As this interagency effort also was situated in the community, “Resident space became more controlled as a result of the increased presence of team members in their day-to-day lives” (Capper, Hanson, & Huilman, 1994, p. 343). Team members increased daily contact with residents, at times, also resulted in invasion of their privacy. Though, Capper, Hanson, and Huilman (1994) noted that at the same time, the workings of the interagency effort also became subject to scrutiny by the residents as a result of this contact. This research suggests that “scholars taking poststructural perspectives believe that interagency co-ordination serves to increase community and family surveillance, which perpetuates power inequities” (Capper, Hanson, & Huilman, 1994, p. 340).

School-community institution and interagency partnerships can be difficult to achieve. Indeed, Noblit, Richards, and Adkins (1999) suggested that there is abundant advice for practitioners on how to attain successful collaborations (p. 6). Such advice may prove to be particularly helpful in confronting difficulties that focus on issues of control of these partnerships. In fostering school-linked, school-based and interagency connections, it also is important to continue to hear the voice and concerns of families. Without the critical input of families, inequities in these relationships are fostered.

**Family-Community Institution Relations**

As part of collaborative efforts of families, schools and community institutions, community agencies and organizations are coordinated to provide a variety of services to families including emergency food/clothing, housing, health care, child care, crime/safety assistance and in some cases spiritual support. Such connections have been discussed to a degree in the previous section of this paper. Yet, in coordinating these efforts, the existing relationships between families and these community agencies and organizations also must be reflected upon if successful educational partnerships are to be developed. Understanding this third area of relationships, likewise, is critical to fostering equitable partnerships.

Due to the different roles of community agencies and organizations, it is difficult to succinctly characterize the nature of the relationships that occur between families and these institutions. Different working tones are expected and exhibited with the families who interact with these diverse institutions, which suggest that partnerships of families, schools and community institutions also would be differ-
ently shaped. For example, there are differences between how a family might interact with the public housing authority for housing services, versus a food pantry coordinated by a local church, versus a juvenile court.

Nonetheless, findings of a field-based case study that this researcher (Kolodny, 2001) conducted in one inner-city neighborhood in the Northeast that explored the daily associations between families and community institutions, suggested that to some extent the existing relationships between these groups rest on inequalities with implications for educational collaborations. In this research, I suggested that the inequalities in these associations stem from inequitable structural conditions - political, economic, social and racial practices - that have shaped the environment of urban neighborhoods, placed a large population of urban residents at an economic disadvantage and compelled them to seek social services. Indeed, Robert Halpern (1999) in his comprehensive study of the history of supportive services for families in poverty noted that the conditions of inner city neighborhoods are overwhelming the capacities of social service institutions.

More than 40 percent of poor families with children now live in urban neighborhoods characterized by high concentrations of poverty, profound social and economic isolation from the larger society, and the weakening of the institutions that hold a community together and sustain its residents. What has served historically as the paradigm of highest-risk family life—chronic financial and material hardship, vulnerable and overwhelmed parents, overburdened social support networks, and an unsupportive community context — is rapidly becoming the norm for young families in urban poverty. The large and growing numbers of multiple vulnerable families are overwhelming the capacities of even the strongest community social service agencies. (p. 10)

Inequitable structural conditions also have overlapped with public policy rooted in perceptions regarding which family members are deserving of support, and subsequently has influenced who receives services (Katz, 1995). Low-income mothers and their children typically are recipients of services, whereas fathers are less involved or excluded. These policies suggest implications for how diverse family members coordinate their interactions with community agencies and organizations. They, likewise, offer insight into the distrust that the public often places on families who reach out to services. For example, men are thought to be able to provide for themselves, though well paying employment may be difficult to obtain. Likewise, though women are provided with services for them and their families, negative stereotypes often are still attached (Katz, 1995, pp. 24-30).

In addition, the inequalities that are intrinsic to these relationships carry through to the roles that families and staff from community agencies and organizations assume with each other in their daily interactions. For example, staff from community agencies and organizations typically are placed in authoritarian roles when delivering services. Families, in contrast, are dependents. Families subsequently may be scrutinized about their personal lives when receiving assistance.
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They may have background checks conducted on them, as well as be assessed informally and formally in their care for their children. Privacy often is invaded. As a result of this study, this researcher suggested that those pursuing urban educational partnerships with community agencies and organizations do so cautiously due to the existing inequitable relationships between families and staff from these institutions. Such an interpretation may seem overly deterministic. And, indeed families exhibit consciousness, agency and, at times, resistance when interacting with these institutions. Likewise, staff from community agencies and organizations at times are aware of the constraints that accompany their jobs in providing services, and may bend organizational rules to help families. Nonetheless, it also is important to recognize that the before mentioned circumstances and practices are not isolated events, but common occurrences. Though community agencies and organizations provide needed assistance to families, the official roles of these institutions may not always be as benevolent and constructive as envisioned. As schools reach out to these institutions for support, they need to be aware of the tensions that often underlie their relationships with families.

Identifying inequalities in collaborative efforts of families, schools and community institutions in low-income urban areas reveals that participants often do not interact from similar positions of power in these partnerships. This particularly can be seen through an examination of existing associations in these partnerships, including the family-school, school-community institution/interagency and family-community institution relationships. In many situations, families are placed in less authoritarian positions in these partnerships. For those families, school staff and representatives from community institutions who are engaged in collaborative efforts, these disparities and inequalities may be perceived in an applied sense through different lenses/positions. In the next section of this paper I discuss three of these potential positions.

Family, School, Community Collaboration Idealism

The first position I refer to as Family, School, Community Collaboration Idealism. In referring to idealism, I suggest that these educational partnerships largely are envisioned to be honorable endeavors, often with distinguishable goals that are designed to support the social and academic development of children. In such a position, the tendency may be to focus on existing social problems as reasons for advocating these partnerships. Manning and Rodriguez (2000), for example, wrote:

In addition to the demands of...global challenges, our school systems are decaying in the face of threats from poverty, drugs, homelessness, gang violence, teenage pregnancies, high dropout rates, and astronomical levels of teen unemployment. The interrelation of these problems creates an imperative that schools, businesses, families and social service agencies work together to try to redeem what some are calling a lost generation of youth. (p. 19)
The inclination may be to highlight the positive outcomes of these partnerships, though research in this area may be lacking and/or difficult to obtain. Melaville and Blank (2000), for example, suggested:

Preliminary evaluations and abundant anecdotal observation confirm that the emerging field of school-community initiatives is full of rich and promising activity. Assessing the long-term impact of these initiatives on young people, their families, and schools has been severely limited by cost and the analytic difficulty of evaluating what are typically complex, multi-layered undertakings, but what we already know suggests that expanded support is a wise investment. (p. 3)

It is envisioned that these collaborative efforts are empowering to participants, including families. Capper, Hanson, and Huilman (1994) suggested that the notion of empowerment is compatible with critical theorist perspectives which focus on "the deliberate involvement of disempowered people in these dialogues to identify 'problems,' 'causes' and 'solutions' to the inequities in these power relationships based on their own personal experiences" (p. 337). Critical theorist perspectives, which are oriented towards creating social change, are marked by emancipation of oppressed people (Phillips, 2000, pp. 107-108; Poster, 1989, p.1). Through intellectual dialogue about power relationships and inequities, including as they occur in educational collaborations, it is believed that transformative social circumstances may be fostered.

The inequalities that are intrinsic to these partnerships may be acknowledged, noted, discussed, and attempts may be made to resolve them. However, the tendency may be to optimistically believe that these endeavors will yield positive results. At times, rhetoric fosters the continued support and expansion of these partnerships. The danger in a largely idealistic position, however, is that these partnerships do not reach their full potential and that inequitable relations are fostered.

**Family, School, Community Collaboration Fatalism**

The second position is to view the inequalities that accompany these collaborations as a means to maintain inequitable relations in society, and as a means to continue an unjust social order. Institutional linked reproductive processes that foster the status quo have been extensively examined by researchers. Bowles and Gintis (1976), for example, wrote about the functions of schools that perpetuate inequitable operations of economic life. They wrote:

Schools foster legitimate inequality through the ostensibly meritocratic manner by which they reward and promote students, and allocate them to distinct positions in the occupational hierarchy. They create and reinforce patterns of social class, racial and sexual identification among students which allow them to relate "properly" to their eventual standing in the hierarchy of authority and status in the production process. (p. 11)
Jean Anyon (1994) also came to the conclusion that different types of schools—working class, middle class, affluent and elite—educate children in different manners. For example, Anyon suggested that working class schools emphasize mechanical, rote behavior with little decision making. Affluent and elite schools, in contrast, emphasize negotiation and the creative elaboration of ideas, as well as the opportunity to develop and utilize skills of linguistic, artistic and scientific expression. Such differences, Anyon suggested emphasizes a “hidden curriculum” of school work. “These differences may not only contribute to the development in the children in each social class of certain types of economically significant relationships and not others, but would thereby help to reproduce this system of relations in society” (Anyon, 1994, p. 273).

Piven and Cloward (1971), likewise, explored another type of social institution, relief providing agencies that, too, have helped perpetuate inequalities in society.

We have already suggested that relief is partly designed to enforce work. But much more should be understood of this mechanism than merely that it reinforces work norms. It also goes far toward defining and enforcing terms on which different classes of men are made to do different kinds of work, relief arrangements, in other words, have a great deal to do with maintaining social and economic inequities. (p. xvii)

Institutional linked reproductive/social control factors, too, may be connected to family, school, community partnerships, and subsequently as a means to maintain inequitable relations. Family, school, community partnerships are, in a sense, an extension of the workings of schools and community institutions. How partnerships members are positioned with power, authority and decision making, reflects relations of the larger society. The inequalities in these partnerships function as part of the maintenance of the status quo.

This perspective I refer to as Family, School, Community Partnership Fatalism. The term fatalism is borrowed from Paulo Freire (1970/1996), who wrote that those who look at reality from a fatalistic position believe that reality is pre-established, an inevitable fate. In such a position, it may be recognized that a root of family, school, community partnerships rests on a realm of false generosity. In order to continue an inequitable social order, ‘generosity’ by those in power is expressed through these partnerships. Yet, this ‘generosity’ does not function to create meaningful change. It serves to preserve the status quo. The danger in looking at family, school, community partnerships from a fatalistic position, however, is that the beneficial aspects of these efforts, such as the coordination of communication and services among participating groups, tends to be discounted and diminished. Also, existing model programs such as Dr. James Comer’s School Development Program, tend to be seen as examples of unique efforts, rather than as common possibilities.
Family, School, Community Collaboration Co-optation

The third position I refer to as Family, School, Community Collaboration Co-optation. In this position, the inequalities that are intrinsic to these partnerships are recognized and co-opted. For example, the identification of the inequalities in these partnerships may be co-opted to blame those who lack power. Lack of parental involvement in urban schools may be co-opted to blame families for educational shortcomings. Inequitable relationships between families and community agencies and organizations may be co-opted to suggest that families often are not ethical and forthcoming when receiving services and thus need to be monitored closely. Subsequently, through collaborative efforts families may continue to be managed, as well as unnecessarily hindered at times. Kritek (1996), suggested:

This...questions the appropriateness of any additional social engineering and social control. If people are already overcontrolled by countless laws and regulatory agencies, it may be that they are actually protected in some measure by the gaps and looseness of coordination. To tighten up the system much more even in the name of providing help, may, in fact, make it even more totalitarian than some people currently perceive it. (p. xviii)

Identification of these inequalities also may be co-opted to push a more conservative agenda. For example, identification of the inequalities in these partnerships may be utilized as a reason for withdrawing school participation in these initiatives and solely focusing on a back-to-the-basics curriculum. Indeed, Finn-Stevenson and Zigler (1999) noted, "Some opponents argue that schools should not assume responsibility for anything but the traditional mission of the school, namely, to teach children ages 5 to 18" (p. 62).

Either/Or Thinking About Inequalities in Family, School, Community Collaborations

A critical analysis of the inequalities in family, school, community collaborations in urban areas supports notice of the contradictions that accompany these initiatives, as well as recognition of different realities that are inherent to these partnerships. Such an analysis also provides an opportunity to consider and reflect on the diverse perceptions that may be attached to inequalities that are identified in the working relationships of these partnerships.

In Western society, there is a certain tendency to categorize and dichotomize one's thinking about specific people, experiences, phenomena and/or relationships. John Dewey (1938/1997), for example, noted that either-or thinking fueled criticisms and critiques of educational methodologies, such as traditional versus progressive education. Yet, he insightfully suggested that an educational methodology which is rejected, often only takes its cue in practice from that which is disavowed, instead of in constructive development of its own philosophy (p. 20).
Subsequently, the principles of a developing educational philosophy may unfold negatively rather than positively. Patricia Hill Collins (1991) also suggested that either/or dichotomous thinking, which categorizes people, things and ideas in terms of their difference from one another, is a central component of Western society and leads to thinking in oppositional terms (pp. 68-69). In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks (1984) also shared examples of how either/or thinking has shaped some of her life experiences. For example, hooks wrote that she often has been asked if being black is more important to her than being a woman. Yet, she noted that, “All such assumptions are rooted in competitive either/or thinking...Most people are socialized to think in terms of opposition rather than compatibility” (p. 29).

With regard to family, school, community partnerships in urban areas, identifying inequalities in the existing relationships among participants in these endeavors may, too, compel one to engage in either/or thinking, or to categorize one’s perspectives of these partnerships in diverse positions—perhaps idealistic, fatalistic, co-opted. However, rather than considering how these differing positions gain meaning only in relation to their counterparts, an analysis also may compel those involved in these undertakings to more fully consider the intricacies of these partnerships.

It may not be wise to quickly categorize one’s perceptions of these educational collaborations, particularly with regard to their existing inequalities. If these educational collaborations are viewed largely idealistically, necessary reflection and social change may not occur to foster equitable partnerships. If these educational partnerships are viewed largely fatalistically, social change may not be attempted at all. If the inequities of these partnerships are co-opted, disparity is fostered. Yet, each of these three positions offers an understanding of how these educational collaborations may be perceived. To envision and foster social conditions in which these educational collaborations become more equitable, a foundation of this understanding is needed. It is from this point that the more pragmatic and necessary discussion and task of developing equitable educational collaborations may be undertaken.

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Idealistic, Fatalistic, and Co-opted Perceptions


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