

Frank FURSTENBERG

THE FAMILY IN THE CITY

RESUMEN

Este artículo plantea un interesante análisis, resultado de investigaciones, sobre las relaciones existentes entre familia, escuela y medio ambiente urbano, o barrio (*neighborhood*). Hasta ahora se ha demostrado suficientemente que los problemas relacionados con crimen, abuso de drogas, problemas de salud mental y el fracaso en la escuela, se encuentran desproporcionalmente localizados en las comunidades más pobres en los EE UU, especialmente en los extremadamente pobres barrios urbanos o *inner-cities*. Sin embargo, las correlaciones entre comunidades de bajos ingresos, y el problema del comportamiento y los bajos logros por parte de los niños no demuestra necesariamente que los niños y sus familias se comporten diferentemente porque hayan crecido en comunidades de bajos ingresos.

ABSTRACT

Almost by definition the concentration of poverty is associated with the concentration of family problems and less well functioning communities. Researchers have had no problem documenting that crime, drug abuse, mental health problems, and school failure are all disproportionately located in poorer communities in the United States, specially in very poor neighborhoods. However, for the author, that correlation of low income communities and problem behavior or low achievement among children does not necessarily demonstrate that families and children behave differently because they grow up in low income communities.

Palabras clave

Barrios, barrios centrales de la ciudad
escuelas, familia.

Key-words

Neighborhood, inner-cities, school,
family.

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■ 1 / THE QUESTION OF NEIGHBORHOOD EFFECTS

Studying families in the city has a long history, but this field of research languished in the late 1970s and 1980s when interest in the poor went out of fashion (Marcks, 1991). We can give credit to the publication of William J. Wilson's (1987) book *The Truly Disadvantaged* for helping to re-invigorate urban sociology. Wilson's ideas helped to stimulate both funding sources and researchers to take another look at the plight of inner-city families.

Wilson argues that the growing concentration of poverty in minority communities, resulting from the loss of well-paying, unskilled jobs in large cities, imperils the family in disadvantaged communities. Without work, marriage becomes less viable, early and out-of-wedlock childbearing increases and a growing number of children spend part or all of their lives in families headed by females. The absence of working males in the neighborhood contributes to the decline of social order and what Elijah Anderson (1999) has called "the code of the streets" .

A spate of research by Americans on family life in the inner city has resulted from Wilson's thesis (1987). Unquestionably, poverty, marital instability, and parental unemployment are all linked to poor prospects for children in later life. The spacial concentration of low-income families in ghetto communities consequently is associated with severe demands on neighborhood schools and social services. Thus, almost by definition, the concentration of poverty is associated with the concentration of family problems and less well-functioning communities. Researchers have had no problems documenting that crime, drug abuse, mental health problems, and school failure are all disproportionately located in poorer communities in the United States, especially so in very poor, urban neighborhoods. (Lemann, 1986)

However, the correlation of low-income communities and problem behavior or low-achievement among children does not necessarily demonstrate that families and children behave differently because they grow up in low-income communities. Some years ago, in reviewing the literature on "neighborhood and school effects", Jencks and Mayer (1990) observed that demonstrating a contextual effect requires

showing that living in a neighborhood creates a specific effect on some behavior that is over and above than the impact resulting from the demographic composition of the neighborhood. The same logic, of course, applies to measuring school effects. For example, if black youth begin to have sex earlier than white youth, one would expect to find earlier sexual initiation in neighborhoods (or schools) with heavy concentrations of blacks. But to prove the existence of a "neighborhood effect", these patterns of earlier sexual initiation must be even greater than they would be were the same black families residing in a mostly white community.

Statistical procedures for demonstrating such contextual influences involve the use of hierarchical linear models, which enables researchers to estimate "the added effect" of context net of demographic composition. However, only recently have researchers begun to employ such techniques in measuring the impact of neighborhoods on youth development. Most studies of urban neighborhoods have not been designed to contrast behavioral patterns in a large enough sample of different neighborhoods. In addition, it is necessary to measure characteristics of the neighborhood, families, and youth residing in communities in order to show theoretical linkages between features of the neighborhood, families patterns, and youth development. Until recently, we have had neither the theory nor the empirical research to test whether the quality of neighborhoods influence the trajectory of youth development (Furstenberg and Hughes, 1997).

■ 2 / THE PHILADELPHIA STUDY

In 1990, I and a group of colleagues in the MacArthur Network on Successful Adolescence in High-Risk Communities undertook such a study in Philadelphia. The full report of this research is described in a recent book entitled *Managing To Make It: Urban Families and Adolescent Success* (Furstenberg et al., 1999). This paper will describe some of the key findings of the Philadelphia Study and point out some of the possible policy implications of this research. The research is still ongoing; in 1999, the parents and youth were re-interviewed. An analysis of the follow-up data is currently underway, but it is too soon to report on the findings of the follow-up. But I shall provide some

hints of what we are likely to see as the youth in the study enter early adulthood.

Philadelphia, like many cities on the East Coast of the United States, retains a number of distinct neighborhoods. Yet, migration from the city during the past several decades has eroded the structure of these communities and undermined many of their institutions. Community services have disappeared, churches have closed down, and schools have deteriorated —resulting in less community identity among the residents of the many neighborhoods in the city. Thus, the initial problem that we faced was how to define the boundaries of a neighborhood. To look at this issue, we undertook a small-scale, qualitative study to examine perceptions of neighborhoods, how residents living in different communities perceived of varying levels of risk and opportunities, and whether these neighborhood conditions and perceptions affected parenting strategies.

Five field workers spent nearly a year studying a small number of families living in five different communities with differing racial and social class populations. They spent time with the parents, the children, and talked to neighborhoods, service providers, and knowledgeable informants who knew what was going on in each of the communities. We learned several important things from this qualitative field study. First, individuals living in close proximity did not necessarily share the same perceptions of their neighborhood. And second, parents and youth within the same household also often differed in their views of the boundaries and descriptions of their neighborhood. Despite the difficulty of capturing the objective boundaries of neighborhoods, it seemed clear that parents residing in the same communities frequently had similar perceptions of their neighbors and often employed similar strategies for managing their children. These family strategies appeared to be a potential link between the features of neighborhoods, parenting practices, and child outcomes.

More specifically, we found that in the white, ethnic communities, where services and resources were more abundant, parents often co-socialized their children with neighborhoods. Most of these white communities consisted of Catholics, who typically sent their children to

parochial schools which were closely linked to the parish church. Families were embedded in a tight-knit neighborhood where parents frequently knew one another and exchanged services and support. Most families had extended kin who lived close by and shared responsibility for helping out. These neighborhoods, relatively speaking, had high social capital that is, families were surrounded by like-minded individuals on whom they relied to keep their children in line. While this system of co-socialization sometimes failed, it typically kept children on track by offering both sponsorship, mentoring, and social control (For comparable research, see Bott, 1971; Gans, 1962; Young and Willmott, 1957; and Jarret's, 1992 review of related literature).

At the other extreme, in the poorest communities with limited services and resources, parents frequently were isolated from and distrustful of their neighbors. They were less likely to rely on community institutions when such institutions were present near by, fearing that their children could be exposed to negative influences. Sometimes, they made efforts to channel their children outside their immediate neighborhood, believing that outside institutions might be better elsewhere; this belief led many parents to eschew local schools and recreational services, preferring to confine their children to their household or to entrust them to the care of relatives or close neighbors. These lock-up strategies were obviously more suitable for younger children than adolescents, who often chafed under parental restrictions. Moreover, they represented self-defeating beliefs for the parents of more mainstream families were disinclined to invest in their local institutions, believing that they were beyond repair. When families had the means to do so, they moved out of the neighborhood to seek better opportunities for their children.

Because of the small number of cases, the qualitative study gave us little opportunity to tell whether the link between properties of the neighborhood and family strategies could be generalized, and if so, whether such strategies had consequences for children's developmental trajectories. These questions motivated us to undertake a more expansive survey of broad areas of Philadelphia, mainly comprised of poor, working class, and lower-middle class White and

African-American families. Drawing on a representative sample of census tracts, we screened households by telephone to identify families with children between the ages of 11 and 15. In all, our study included nearly 500 households spread over 62 census tracts. It turned out that census tracts did a reasonable job of capturing within-neighborhood variations, though obviously the census track imposed an arbitrary definition of a neighborhood.

The telephone screening was followed by an in-home survey that included both face-to-face interviews as well as self-administered questionnaires. We collected a large amount of demographic information on the families, child rearing practices as reported by both adults and children, as well as detailed descriptions of theoretically relevant features of the families, schools, and neighborhoods. Finally, we obtained accounts from both parents and children about the child's well-being along a number of dimensions. We cannot describe all of the specific measures developed from the survey in this paper, but rather will feature some of the most interesting findings. Readers interested in the details might want to consult the book, which describes the results of the analysis and also includes a full description of the measures developed.

Following the survey, we interviewed 34 families residing in four different neighborhoods whose children were either doing well or doing poorly to look for clues that might aid in the quantitative analysis and also allow us to probe the survey findings in greater depth. Thus, the qualitative case studies provided a chance to confirm or disconfirm interpretations that emerged from the survey analysis. As we continued to talk to these families for several years following the survey, we also began to chart the likely course of the youth in the study as they moved from early adolescence into their late teens.

■ 3/ FINDINGS OF THE PHILADELPHIA STUDY

In measuring parenting practices great care was taken to include many of the widely used measures of warmth, autonomy in decision-making, discipline effectiveness, and monitoring that anchor much of the child development literature on successful child rearing techniques. Over time and in repeated studies, researchers have

shown that children fare better when their parents exercise a balance between too little and too much control (authoritative practices) and when they balance discipline with warmth and support (Maccoby and Martin, 1983; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch and Darling, 1992). Parents are also more successful when they modify their discipline and control as children enter adolescence. We had anticipated that family practices might vary by neighborhood in part because practices often reflect social class differences (Kohn, 1969; Jarret, 1992). However, we found virtually no evidence that so-called competent parenting varied across neighborhoods. Able and less able parents resided in all neighborhoods, including many of the poorest census tracts in our sample. Evidence of this finding is displayed in Figure 1, which shows the Inter-Class Correlations across the census tracts with at least five residents: the ICC is a measure of the variation across neighborhoods compared to the variation within neighborhoods and measurement error (a score of .0 would indicate no variation across neighborhoods). Our findings suggest that in-home child rearing practices are not associated with the level of poverty in the neighborhood, the degree of social cohesiveness, or the level of resources.

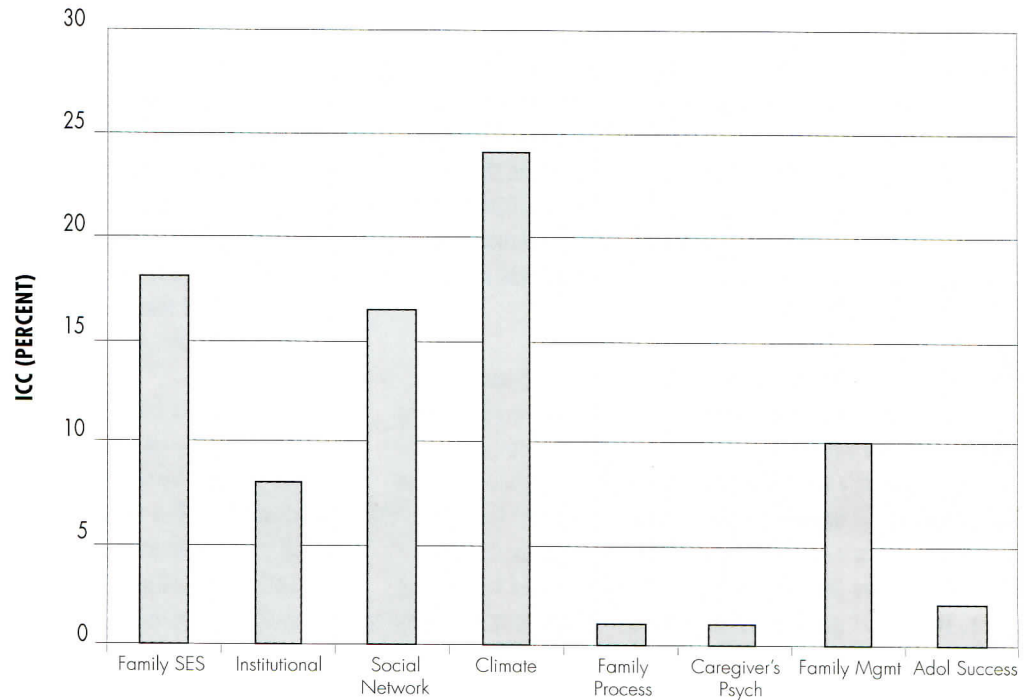
The pattern is quite different when we examine the family management strategies that were the novel component of this study. The manner and degree to which parents direct their children to resources outside the family was measured by a variety of scales explicitly constructed for the Philadelphia Study. We examined, for example, how parents cultivated special talents and abilities, how they connected their children to agencies outside the household, their choice of schools, and their monitoring practices outside the home. We broadly classified their strategies into preventive and promotive techniques that might have consequences for achievement and social engagement as well as limiting problem behavior and promoting mental health. Again, referring to Figure 1, we can see that the ICC's are much higher than for the "traditional" measures of child rearing. Supporting the principle finding of our qualitative study, these results indicate that family management strategies do indeed vary across neighborhoods.

The qualitative evidence from our cases studies supported this conclusion as well. Parents residing in dangerous neighborhoods were

FIGURE 1

INTRA-CLASS CORRELATIONS

by Census Tract



disinclined to entrust their children to local institutions. They exercised greater control within the household, restricting their children's after school and evening activities. By contrast, parents living in more resource rich communities were more predisposed to allow their children to engage in community institutions, primarily because they felt confident that their offspring would be adequately supervised. More often than not, their children were attending parochial schools that involved an elaborate program of afterschool and weekend activities. The broad story is clear: local institutions are extensively used by families to co-socialize their children in better off neighborhoods where such institutions abound and have the confidence of the community.

Given the results described above, we might have expected to find that children living in the more advantaged neighborhoods would be

far better than those in the more distressed communities. Surprisingly, the differences in the various outcome measures were slight and inconsistent. Our outcomes for the most part were the standard array that have been included in many studies of child development in early adolescence: academic achievement, personal competence, and engaging in problem behavior. We also included a measure of pro-social involvement in activities. This latter indicator was the only outcome that was linked to neighborhood quality. Predictably, children in neighborhoods with more community resources were more likely to be involved in pro-social activities.

Several explanations may account for the absence of neighborhood variation in the well-being and ill-being of the children in the study. Possibly, the absence of a strong relationship may be linked to certain features of the design of the study. Our range of census tracts was

restricted: we under-represented census tracts at the bottom and at the top because of the screening procedure and also undercounted those without a working telephone. Considerable attention was devoted to estimating how many families might have been included and what impact these sampling limitations might have on the findings. No doubt, the results bias our findings somewhat in the direction of restricting the range of neighborhoods and the variation within neighborhoods. However, sensitivity tests and data from outside sources convinced us that the absence of a strong relationship between neighborhood quality and youth outcomes was not primarily a methodological artifact.

Results from a companion study done in Denver, Colorado that included many of the same measures as our survey revealed sharp variations by the youth's age. Outcomes began to diverge across neighborhoods only when the youth in the study reached their mid- and late-teens. It appears from the Denver study that features of the neighborhood begin to be felt as individuals spend less time in families and more time in peer groups or unsupervised outside the home. This makes good sense. In the Philadelphia study, we began to see indication from the qualitative interviews that outcomes may indeed begin to vary more by neighborhood as the youth get older and are exposed to greater possibilities of engaging in problem behaviors.

Returning to the link between parenting practices and youth outcomes, our findings showed a very different pattern depending on whether we examined traditional measures or family management strategies. Each of these broad categories were associated with different outcomes. Warmth was related to the child's mental health and personal competence; discipline effectiveness and restrictiveness was linked to problem behavior; and parental investment was related to academic achievement and pro-social activity. Thus, no single parental practice was related to all youth outcomes. Rather, we could say that a configuration of parenting practices was related to particular outcomes. Since our data are cross-sectional, it is also important to note that parents were reacting to their children's behavior in addition to shaping it; and children's behavior prompted various parenting practices. We referred to this exchange as a "dance" between parents

and children where it is almost impossible to distinguish who leads and who follows.

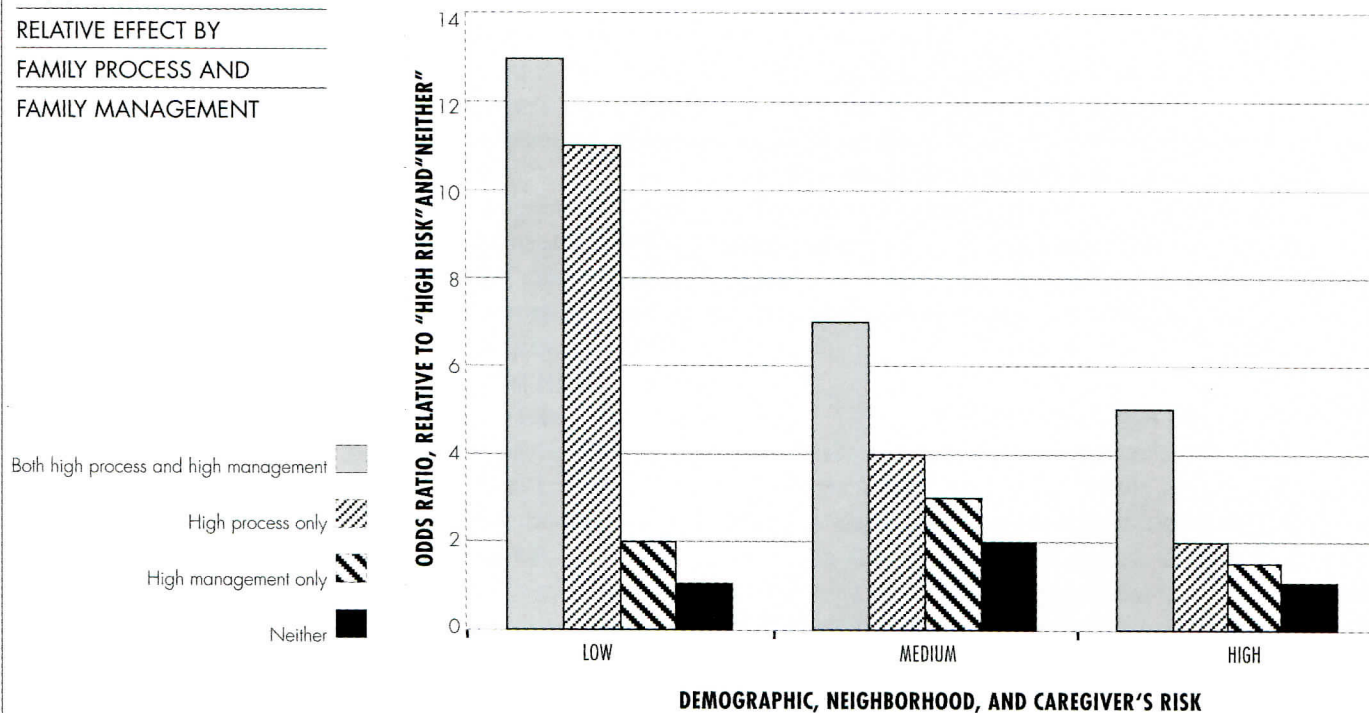
In certain respects, multivariate analyses do not mimic well what happens in the real world, that is, more often than not, particular patterns of parenting, family behaviors, parental characteristics, and contexts outside the home —while largely independent of one another— cluster together. Well functioning individuals are somewhat more likely to have the wherewithal to send their children to better schools and live in better neighborhoods. Over-stressed parents frequently find themselves without the supports in the community that their counterparts in other areas might be able to call upon.

Even though we find capable parents living in all kinds of neighborhoods, we also see that the agglomeration of advantage and disadvantage is not random; it is spatially located in the poorer communities. This led us to ask the question of what happens when we look at how parenting practices are related to youth outcomes in situations of multiple advantage and disadvantage. Not only can we cumulate the patterns of risk, but we can also look at more global measures of success. Using a cluster analysis, we classified the youth broadly into youth who were doing well and those who were either on the borderline of failure or doing poorly.

Then we compared the odds of successful adjustment to early adolescence in high, medium, and low risk contexts. The combination of parental, family, and neighborhood risks are associated with strikingly different patterns of success among the youth in our sample. Moreover, as is shown in Figure 2, parenting patterns produce a very different relationship to success in the three types of contexts. In all three risk contexts, children have a greater likelihood of success when their parents provide positive support and effective discipline in the home as well as being good managers and monitors of their children's activities outside the home. Being good at both aspects of parenting increases the child's chances of success, especially in high risk settings, where children might otherwise fare poorly if they lacked effective parents. Conversely, children will not do well even in low risk settings if parents function poorly inside the home. Yet, we can still

FIGURE 2

RELATIVE EFFECT BY
FAMILY PROCESS AND
FAMILY MANAGEMENT



see the powerful advantages of living in a favorable family and neighborhood context in Figure 2. Children are three times more likely to be successful in low risk settings as high risk settings even when their parents are able parents and effective managers of the world outside the household. Clearly, good family process and management is a necessary condition for success in early adolescence. Moreover, competent parenting buffers the risk of environmental or family adversity. However the odds of success soar when children live in a low risk environment and receive good parenting.

These findings are based on a single point in time and do not necessarily indicate a causal pattern between effective parenting, benign environments, and successful adolescence. However, both the qualitative case studies that were carried out for nearly three years after the survey was completed and the recent data collected in a

follow-up survey that was concluded in 1998 reinforce the impressions provided by the first wave of the study. Once on a positive trajectory, the youth in our study were inclined to do well. That is not to say that important reversals did not occur during the course of the qualitative follow-up interviews or in the second wave of the study, when the youth were in their late teens and early twenties.

As this article is being written, we are currently examining the data from the follow-up study and comparing it to the findings of the cases studies. Some parents were able to get their children who were off track onto a more successful path, employing strategies such as changing neighborhoods, schools, or intense involvement by family members. More often, it seems that youth have had difficulties staying on course because of changing conditions in the middle and later years of adolescence. The influence of neighborhoods is becoming more

evident for older teens, as parents have greater difficulty isolating them from the lure of the street. Poor schools also have more pronounced effects as youth enter the age of school leaving and begin to prefer work or even idleness to the indignities of largely custodial education. The lack of effective institutions for adolescents in the so-called "forgotten half", the youth who are not college bound, seems to be taking its toll on the young adults in our study who have dropped out of school or who manage to graduate from high school but lack the skills necessary to get a good job. These problems appear to be especially large for the African-American males, many of whom get caught up in the criminal justice system or in the underground economy.

■ 4/ IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Inner-city families have been the target of considerable attention by American policy makers, practitioners, and the public at large. Even those sympathetic to their plight speak of the need to provide greater assistance, while critical observers worry about low parental commitment and lack of parenting skills. Leaving aside those families that might not have fallen into our sample and who possibly might be more dysfunctional than the participants in this study, we found little evidence that the quality of parenting was notably different or deficient among parents in more distressed communities than in the better off neighborhoods in Philadelphia. However, it is clear that parents in the better off neighborhoods had access to more and higher quality services and schools. They also felt more confident about entrusting their children to the care of neighbors and friends than did parents in the poorest communities, who feared that neighbors did not share their values and standards.

The absence of social resources and social capital in the poorer communities represents a real problem for parents who feel compelled to adopt a highly protective strategy of childbearing that is centered in the home. Consequently, children were treated more restrictively by parents who were more concerned about keeping bad things from happening to their children than helping to promote their social and intellectual development. It was not that they were unconcerned about fostering positive experiences. However, low-income parents in the

poorer neighborhoods more often lacked the means, the know-how, and the ability to link their children to positive experiences that might enhance their development. For most of these parents, the church stood as one of the few institutions that they could rely on, but churches in many neighborhoods were strapped for resources and services, especially those directed at the teenage population.

Restrictive strategies, unless they are skillfully and lovingly instituted, also are inherently problematic as children reach the adolescent years. Peer relationships count more during adolescence as teenagers are increasingly inclined to look to their friends for intimacy and validation. Our qualitative research showed how some parents seemed to face greater resistance as their children, boys especially, chafed against parental rules. Parents were most successful when they had previously established trust and authority and could successfully communicate with their children about the rationale for their regulations. Also, when their children's peers were members of a like-minded group of parents such as a religious community, the rules appeared to be less arbitrary.

Skillful parenting matters for keeping children on track -that is avoiding serious school problems, maintaining good relations with parents and peers, and helping youth stay out of trouble. We also learned that good parenting did not necessarily produce high achievement when schools were inadequate and opportunities for acquiring competencies outside of school were also limited. In short, parents cannot produce children who are well prepared to assume adult responsibilities unless they are afforded access to quality schools and supportive services. Extraordinary efforts by parents sometimes overcome the obstacles imposed by limited resources, but such instances are rare by definition. Sometimes teachers helped out by spotting an academically talented child and directing him or her to better schools. Occasionally parents found outside sponsorship for a gifted child through work or voluntary organizations. However, if ordinary efforts by parents, already overburdened by economic responsibilities, do not suffice, the normal result is that the child will only get by, failing to reach his or her full potential. This is quite the opposite of what typically occurs among affluent families who have

the means to provide tutoring and support for children who may be academically unmotivated or lacking in intellectual talent. Ordinarily, children in the middle-class have an array of services and supports that allow them to develop their potential to the fullest degree.

How can we build more supportive communities for low-income parents residing in impoverished inner-city neighborhoods? A serious policy issue is whether it is better to adopt policies that encourage low-income families to seek resources outside their communities or attempt to strengthen local institutions within impoverished communities. There are obvious advantages and disadvantages to either approach and very little evidence to choose between them. Attempts at the former involve experiments like busing children to districts with better schools, and summer programs that expose children to training programs, work experience, summer camp and the like. More radical efforts involve the relocation of families by providing housing supplements that enable low-income parents to live in more advantaged communities. What little evidence we have suggests that such efforts produce positive, if not dramatic, payoffs for children's well-being. The downside of such efforts is that they are expensive, may involve dislocating families from their support systems (primarily kin), and that they often generate a negative response from the host institutions. School desegregation clearly drove many higher-income parents to flee the public schools or move further from the city. Magnet schools that provide opportunities for talented, low-income children to attend schools based on previous success or test scores siphon children who might otherwise succeed from local schools, creating a more difficult population to serve in the neighborhood schools.

The alternative of strengthening local institutions may improve the social capital of neighborhoods and help to retain families who might otherwise move out when they can afford to do so. The benefits of such policies seem obvious; however, efforts to rebuild distressed neighborhoods and their institutions have not been notably successful. The technology of improving local infrastructure is primitive. Without changing the job prospects of local residents, it seems that such efforts are likely to encounter limited success, at most.

I regard school improvements as the key to improving the morale and functioning of communities. At least in the U.S., families with children are likely to give the greatest priority in residential choice to the quality of the schools. It is difficult to imagine improving the quality of neighborhood life in the absence of improving local schools. Hence the critical ingredient is making urban schools better resources for the family and the child. If it were possible to make local schools the hub of a neighborhood, parents might begin to take more responsibility for what happens during the school day. The development of full-service schools have been instituted in some communities already.

What are the essential components of this model of community building? First, the full-service school must have long hours to serve the residents that live in the surrounding neighborhood. The school must open early and include facilities for daycare and emergency childcare (for mildly ill children). It must remain open in the afternoon to provide afterschool and recreational programs. In the evening hours, the school can provide a setting for community meetings, evening training programs, and counseling services. If not on the same campus, it still can create a link to health services, library facilities, and athletic programs. For neighborhoods lacking general amenities like supermarkets, banks, and stores, the school campus would provide a "Main Street" where families would feel safe, comfortable and welcome.

Obviously, it is not possible to build such a campus for every school, but it might encourage the development of new schools that combine primary and secondary schools in a set of buildings much as some private or parochial schools do now. The idea is to promote both family and child continuity of service, so that a community of adults (teachers, service providers, coaches, and community figures) can be available as supportive agents to families —reducing the social distance between residents and the professionals whose job it is to serve them.

The idea, then, is to create the school as a "village center" where community residents feel a sense of ownership and pride, where resources are provided to all residents, and where professionals and

residents may meet as they might —on the streets in a small town. A pizza parlor, ice cream store, or drug store might be permitted to rent space at low—cost to build a sense of community solidarity, and not incidentally, to provide jobs to older students in the school.

The staffing of community schools and supplementary services requires training a different brand of teachers who are equipped with a broad range of competencies. Obviously, they must be prepared to meet the pedagogical challenge of teaching children who often enter school without the full range of habits required for doing well. The problem of preparing students for school can be partly addressed by offering stimulating pre-school programs that prime children for doing well in school. Involving parents actively in pre-school programs also helps parents know what is required to ensure that their children will do well when they enter primary school. In addition, it identifies families that need and will benefit from special assistance.

Beyond possessing first-rate pedagogical skills, teachers and service providers need to know the community in order to be a part of it. They must have a comfort level with the local culture, be acquainted with the respected members of the community, and be able to help parents make connections within and outside the community that will serve their children's interests. Thus, teachers and service providers need to be acquainted with social work and community organizing skills that will help foster close-knit ties within urban neighborhoods.

To recruit professionals with this level of competence and commitment, we need to train and support a class of urban master teachers who can command higher salaries and greater autonomy than is ordinarily provided to teachers. Greater ability to experiment with school and classroom organization and flexibility of schedules may bring talented people into the teaching ranks, but it will be necessary to develop stricter measures of peer supervision, higher standards of professional education and post-degree training, and support systems for master teachers.

None of these measures is likely to strengthen youth development unless they are accompanied by a bottom-up approach that helps

community members to work with more open, engaging, and supportive local institutions. Parents who are active in the community can play an important role in helping make connections to more isolated families who cannot benefit from better performing schools and social services unless they become actively involved in local programs. As might occur in programs of voter registration or campaigns to increase vaccinations, residents are the best source of referrals and the most promising means of reaching out to those who are the least likely to become involved.

As they become cheaper and more accessible, new forms of technology may supplement the telephone in communicating news and information to both parents and children about local services. It is no longer difficult for teachers to send assignments directly to the home, to chat with parents by email (when possible) or phone (when necessary). Health workers, recreational aides, and service providers may forge ties with local constituents electronically. None of these efforts will be a substitute for personal, intimate contact, but they may reinforce and supplement face-to-face interactions.

This model of the urban village may at first hearing appear Utopian. However, if we look at what routinely occurs in many affluent communities, small towns, and rural areas, it appears less far-fetched. Schools do provide many of the programs and services listed above, professionals are better trained and more highly paid, and new modes of communication are widely accessible to adults and children. Indeed, the advantages accruing to the truly advantaged are leaving the truly disadvantaged further and further behind.

Can public policy address the growing gap between the top and bottom? If we want to stem the growth of inequality that has widened in the last quarter of the twentieth century, we can hardly afford not to take bolder actions. The resistance to addressing the increased isolation of the inner-city requires political will as much as promising solutions. The disparate condition and despair of those at the bottom is largely a product of the indifference of those at the top.

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