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## Abstract

Schools are ubiquitous in American society. Among their central functions is relating to and building the sense of community. Experiences in schools tend to have an intimate connection to people's identities and to social networks that persist throughout their lifetimes. School relationships shape community relationships. This chapter explores schools as a dimension of community life. The focus is different from what we usually see where schools and communities are interrelated by social scientists since the concern here is not with what makes schools and schooling more effective. Rather, the discussion talks about how schools relate to what community is and how schools help to build or undermine a sense of community. While the focus is not on how communities make schools more effective, much of the literature on community explores how schools are embedded in communities and how qualities of community relate to schooling. One of the most important themes involves the concept of social capital, which at the beginning was developed as a way to account for differences in school

success. That literature also shows us things about how schools and other community institutions interrelate, thereby telling us how communities are structured. The chapter explores the concept of "settings", how this relates to building a "sense of community" and how this, in turn, relates to the welfare of children. Children tend to be tied to and dependent on the community as a place, and as such their prosperity is related to the kinds of activities that are available in that place, the values and goal orientations that are developed in the setting, and the way schools are integrated with the setting. Finally, the chapter explores ways schools self-consciously build and are dependent upon local residents identifying with the local community. School sports have a strong role in the development of community identity. But the chapter discusses how schools as organizations depend on the local sense of community and actions schools take to encourage residents to feel that they are part of a community.

The two most ubiquitous institutions in America are schools and churches. It is not just that many of each exist in every town, neighborhood, and city. Central to the mission of both is an attempt to build social ties, a sense of community, and

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motivation for making communities better places. This chapter is about schools and at both the elementary and high school levels families meet each other, undertake joint, mutually supportive action, and form networks and friendship groups that endure, often for a lifetime.

Not all families have the time or inclination to become involved in their children's schools. Kozol (1991) argues that it is precisely this uneven parental commitment that should cause us to oppose arrangements that separate children from committed and motivated families from those whose parents are neglectful and uninformed about how to help their children achieve. Kozol was particularly arguing against charter schools and tracking arrangements in New York. He shares a widely held view that a primary obligation of schools is to help and support children from the poorest families and who suffer because their parents do not seem to know how to parent, or do not care to provide this loving assistance. Parents who do care and who are involved in their children's school lives end up advocating for all children and helping in simple activities like organizing baseball leagues children whose parents do not step up. Take those parents away and overworked and discouraged teachers are left to care for children who often are perceived as misbehaved, cognitively deficient, and dirty. The only chance those children have is for concerned, involved, altruistic parents to play a strong role helping to make the schools all children attend into true community institutions.

Small (2010) reinforces and quantifies Kozol's argument in his study of social capital in preschool programs. If there is a mixture in terms of social class, Small shows that when low-income parents participate in school governance processes, they make gains in personal social capital. The simple fact of participating in governance activities gives these parents both better knowledge about how to interact in middle class contexts but also helps them to develop cross-class social ties. A result is that over time these parents end up being more economically successful than low-income parents who are not involved.

Some theorists, especially those doing research on public health, argue that social capital can only be conceptualized as a community-level variable (Cattell 2011). If this is true we cannot speak, as Small does, of building individual-level social capital and usually we will not be able to build up social capital in a neighborhood or a community.

This runs counter to the analysis of Coleman (1988) who first popularized the concept of social capital and then used the idea to explain achievement differences in low-income schools. In particular, Coleman showed that poor children in Catholic schools perform better than similarly poor children attending public school. This happens, he argued, because Catholic schools are embedded in overlapping circles of voluntary social organizations like the church, parish organizations parents participate in, and parochial schools. One consequence is that many adults know the children in a variety of social contexts. Messages about working hard, being accountable, caring about peers, and being morally committed to values of the community are stated and reinforced as children move from one relationship to another with adults from outside their own family. This builds motivation related to school tasks. It also makes children feel supported by a generalized community feeling even if they are at times not very successful in their schooling work. Overlapping social networks build relationships of trust and also increase the legitimacy of the core social values of schooling. Coleman argued that there is a reciprocal relationship between social capital generated in the Catholic community and the way children become motivated to do well in school (Coleman et al. 1982; Coleman and Hoffer 1987).

A somewhat different argument is articulated by Coleman's colleague Bryk et al. (1993) who studied achievement in a Catholic girl's high school. Bryk argued that girls achieved not just because their school was embedded in an overlapping circle of social ties, but because the philosophy of education emphasized that community and mutual social support were core

values. Bryk argues that public schools, in contrast, emphasized individual, competitive achievement. This separates students socially. While this may benefit middle class children it denies low-income children of informal teaching and social support that come if they are embedded in a strong community and seek that community out because they accept certain values.

Children do not have to be in Catholic schools to benefit educationally from strong, supportive social capital networks. Meier (1995) demonstrates that such a community can be built in a communal school that includes families, even in the lowest income sections of American cities. Similarly, Milofsky and Elion (1988) talk about a similar, collectivist school in a small, rural city. These schools represent intentional innovations but one can find a similar dynamic developing in many elementary schools across community types—urban, suburban, and rural. Small children need the support of parents to do simple things like forming play groups or participating in youth sports or organizing scout troupes.

Parents come into the schools to help with projects like science fairs or local environmental projects. Through these activities parents come to know each other, families join together in social activities, and enduring friendships are built. Parents also come to know some educators as deeply altruistic individuals who make large impacts on their children. Years after their children have graduated from high school, we see parents continuing to help out at high school homecoming games because coaches and teachers made such deep impacts on their children both as caring, supportive adults and as people who laid the foundation for later success in adult life.

These successful outcomes are partially the result of intentional, strategic planning on the part of school system designers, even if that designing has been lost to the mists of history. In a study that predated his work on social capital by twenty years, Coleman (1981) explored the relationship between high school athletics and academic achievement. He found that these two systems of achievement, athletics and academics,

worked independently and somewhat in opposition to each other. He found that high IQ students in schools with weak sports cultures had higher school achievement than children with similar IQs in schools with strong sports cultures. His interpretation was that since all children want to be popular and successful, smart students would put their energy into athletics at strong sports schools and their learning would suffer.

One might take this as a criticism of sports in schools, but one of the reasons extra-curricular sports are more important in United States high schools than they are in many other countries has to do with the commitment to the common school in America. Following Kozol's logic, American schools are committed to educating all of the children, and especially those from low income and working class neighborhoods.

Adult rewards of school success may not flow to children from these neighborhoods even if they graduate successfully. An implicit motivation for working hard in schools is the likelihood of achieving adult success. Stinchcombe (1964) argues that low-income children know that the promise of adult success for those who succeed in school does not really apply to them, even if they have high IQs. He shows that high IQ, low-income students are the most likely to be rebellious. In Coleman's (1981) framework, a different motivator is the opportunity to be successful in athletics. Children who might be rebellious in school and who might drop out might, alternatively, be convinced to be compliant and hard working if they would be kicked off the football team if they did not have a proper attitude. This is just one of the ways schools developed to motivate working class children (Tyack et al. 1984).

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## 27.1 Childhood and Settings

Sports are not just important for binding children to schools, youth sports also are a way that children are tied to communities as settings. Joining sports teams has long been one of the

important identity forming activities for boys (Fine 1987). Since the 1970s sports for girls and women have exploded in popularity so that a significant proportion of both genders are involved in sports teams nearly year around. That parents serve as coaches, drive children to games, and wait around while practices and competitions go on creates a chain of settings that bind parents and children together and also tie all of the families closely together.

One reality of childhood is that young people tend to be restricted to a particular geographic community space (Jenks 2005). This happens partly because institutions like schools or the Catholic Church or AYSO soccer teams create districts or boundaries that define where children will get services, and whose qualities shape learning and development opportunities. It also happens because the physical structure of neighborhoods shapes where and how children can spend time. The availability of parks and playgrounds has a big effect on whether or not children get exercise and also whether they are safe in the spaces where they play (Burdette and Whitaker 2005; Durkin et al. 1999). Hills, ravines, highways, industrial zones chop up the landscape, restricting children to their neighborhoods and shaping their ways of perceiving and interacting with the world.

Youth sports matter because they are one factor that shapes the community as a “setting” (Sarason 1972). Settings are social, physical, organizational, and cultural structures that include norms and values and that produce, or fail to produce, a generalized sense of community in a place (See Boyd and Newell, Chap. 2). Sarason in his writings (Cherniss 2012) usually focused on organizational and therapeutic settings and efforts to minimize “organizational craziness”.

An example comes from Stanton and Schwartz (1954) where they observed that psychotic patients became more disturbed when there was conflict among staff members. Staff members might not overtly express anger at others, but patients picked up on subtleties of their behavior. This might involve something like a staff member forgetting to place a patient’s

clothes in the appropriate place because the staff member was distracted by being angry. The patient then would be upset because his or her established patterns had been disrupted. Stanton and Schwartz (1954) called such a situation a “collective disturbance.” One might think the term refers to some sort of mob activity, but their point was simply that staff conflicts create minor acts of insensitivity that ramify through the system, upset patients, and gradually lead to more and more acting out.

A case from Sarason’s book, *The Psychoeducational Clinic* by McIntyre (1969) gives a parallel example as McIntyre describes the way a cognitively and behaviorally disabled child acted out in a regular school classroom. This was before the expansion of special education programs and the classroom teacher faced the challenge of finding appropriate teaching materials while also dealing with the child’s occasional tantrums. The school psychologist in the case visited the child and saw that while he was he was difficult in the classroom, his disabilities could be managed and he ought to be able to be maintained in a regular classroom if his teacher was thoughtful about his needs and attentive to the things that would lead him to be upset. However, the principal in this case faced some organizational challenges and on several occasions was critical of the student’s teacher. She was an insecure person and she worried that when there were disruptions in her classroom the principal would judge her negatively, perhaps leading to her being laid off when anticipated staffing reductions took place. This led her to be harsh towards the student because she worried that he would be a reason she received a negative evaluation. The result was that the student did not concentrate on his learning and also he had more frequent tantrums. Organizational challenges at the level of the principal, that involved his relationship with the superintendent in this small district, were being transferred down the system to the teacher and ultimately to the child who became increasingly difficult to manage in the classroom.

Examples like this one convinced Sarason that schools were sufficiently complex organizational

environments that they developed an organizational culture. Nearly any change in practice would be undermined and frustrated by unanticipated conflicts of interest and desires to preserve understandings about proper practices and desires to maintain the status quo. In order to introduce a change—he used the example of introducing the new math into the elementary school curriculum—one had to treat it as a disruption in the whole school culture, rather than as a specific technical innovation (Sarason 1972). He proposed the following law about schools: “The more things change, the more they remain the same.”

This line of thinking led Sarason (1972) to propose “settings” as a critical unit of analysis for understanding organizational and therapeutic interventions. Leaders were important for designing settings. It was important to create a sense of community, cohesion, and normative consensus. Most importantly as one imagined developing an intervention one had to think about how the change would be perceived by participants in terms of their personal and professional histories as well as in terms of their understanding of what their organization or program was fundamentally about. We might say, using Selznick’s (1957) language, that the “myth” of the organization had to be developed and integrated with programmatic initiatives.

This style of organizational innovation proved to be very difficult to implement and after a few years Sarason became discouraged with the settings idea. It turned out, however, that the concept was foundational for the field of community psychology as Cherniss (2012) tells us. Settings are the context in which community develops and in which feelings of a sense of community take root. While Sarason was most focused on professional contexts of practice it also became apparent that schools exist in a community context that is more or less supportive both of school activities and of children’s whole lives.

The social capital perspective of Coleman tells us this. It is not that Catholic schools are better than public schools at teaching low income children. Rather, Catholic schools are likely to exist in a matrix of community and institutional

structures that also embed the children. Public schools that serve middle class children are also likely to be embedded in a matrix of institutions that support learning. Middle class schools are foster the formation of parental networks that support school projects, friendship groups, and extra-curricular activities so that children are embedded in overlapping structures that heighten their motivation to be successful, conforming students in school.

For children not in the middle class, community settings are more variable as Furstenberg et al. (1999) show. Social scientists all know that there is a strong correlation between social class and educational achievement. But since all correlations represent only averages, we always should recognize that many cases do not fit the dominant pattern. It is particularly interesting to look at the deviant cases—in this case situations where low income children succeed in school. Many times success can be traced to particularly motivated, well organized parents who are able to keep their children focused on school success. In other cases where parents are not so effective, the key factor is whether or not children are involved in activities outside of school that are supervised by adults, that involve significant time commitments, and that give children a future orientation. A persistent finding in sociological studies of delinquency is that children who are not involved in structured after school activities are likely to be involved in aimless activities, to get in trouble with their friends, and to experience teen pregnancy (Agnew and Peterson 1989; Osgood et al 1996; Bernberg and Thorlindsson 2001; Osgood and Anderson 2004).

Communities vary in terms of how available are structured youth activities. Some of this has to do with local civic culture and how many adults are willing to be leaders in scouting, youth sports leagues, or mentoring programs. There also are variations in the way that local civic cultures are organized to support youth activities. In an informal survey of youth sports leagues in the area where the author lives, one town organized all sports leagues under the auspices of the public schools, another town organized youth sports leagues as town services (the town did not

participate in Little League because it had its own public youth baseball system); the rich town in the area had private clubs devoted to each sport; in another town, all adults participated and supported youth sports as a spontaneous movement; in another town the national Little League organized baseball as part of a regional network of teams, regardless of adult participation in a particular town; in another town the kids organized the leagues, with adults allowing groups of children to register their teams in a league. It is not the fault of a child or a family that he or she lands in one of these towns but the extent to which sports teams form a tightly integrated network with a strong normative core is likely to vary a lot from one town's model to another's.

We might think of community settings in ecological terms. That is, all organisms live in a physical, social, and organic space that provides opportunities and restrictions on getting resources and nurturance, dealing with competition and hostility, and having freedom to move to a new space if an old one is not supportive. The social ecology of childhood would imagine families and children as having been dropped down in a neighborhood of an urban area or a small town and then facing certain objective opportunities and challenges.

An approach more consistent with Sarason would ask what can be done in communities to be more supportive of positive development among children. One aspect is that there may be negative influences in a community and the elders or leaders may be more or less willing to challenge those influences or willing to take them on. Boehm and Itzhaky (2004), for example, describe intervening in a community where child sexual abuse was a known and tolerated problem. Older teenage boys were homosexually abusing younger boys. This had gone on for some years so the young boys would move into the role of the older abusers. This was an orthodox Jewish community in Israel and the adults and the Rabbi knew of the problem but the did not want to humiliate the older boys or stigmatize the community, so people would not act. The problem was deeply disturbing, so people in authority were uncomfortable about taking action.

The social workers who were brought into work on the problem succeeded in finding some adults who were willing to admit the problem existed and to work with the social workers on a solution. They then were able to bring in a high status, very respected Rabbi who succeeded in taking the community's rabbi under his wing. The rabbi overcame his reluctance to intervene. With this support in place, the social workers then were able to undertake counseling with the older abusers to get them to acknowledge the problem and go through therapeutic processes to change their behaviors and stay away from the younger boys. With this achieved, the community was able to establish a frank and open community atmosphere in which there was strong rejection of child sexual abuse and support for a positive normative context. The social workers, in short, were able to challenge a dangerous and destructive setting, deconstruct it, and replace it with a setting that was positive for children.

This section has argued that settings encompass and overlap between schools and communities. Children's lives are strongly affected by the places they live, which are shaped by the physical structure, the community network and the social institutions that are available, by the social class and racial/ethnic makeup of the place, and by the extent to which a symbolic community and sense of community have been created. The fewer social and community structures that are available in a place, the weaker socialization influences are likely to be on children. While we tend to treat community settings as naturally occurring, self-conscious efforts could be made to make them less dysfunctional and more supportive of children.

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## 27.2 Schools and the Construction of Community

Schools are important institutions for creating a sense of community. I do not mean this in the sense of the previous section, where schools play an important role in constructing the community setting in which children live and find

nurturance. Rather, schools as an institution have hegemonic domination over the elementary and secondary educational sphere in the community serving as one of the network of institutions Warren (1967) called “community decision organizations” (CDO). In Warren’s terms schools are hegemonic in the sense that schools are legal agents supervising the requirement that students attend school and that they receive appropriate services. Schools have taxing authority, they must build buildings in locations that make education available to all children, and they provide non-mandated services, like adult education, that are meant to enhance the lives of residents. Controlling this legal and resource mobilization area, schools are relatively independent of other CDOs that have their own, parallel legal mandates and resource mobilization systems. The separation is so complete, that when we did a survey of institutional leaders in one small town, the school superintendent did not know the head of the local housing authority, the organizer of the local free clinic, the leaders of the local hospital, the head of the local United Way, or important faculty and administrators at the college. All of these other CDOs were located within the boundaries of the school district or immediately adjacent to it. Each of the CDOs is truly a silo (Green et al. 2014).

Yet, in a profound way the school district is identified with the town. We talk about communities as symbolic constructions and in many places there is no more powerful symbol of the town than the football team or the basketball team, both of which are organized through the public school system. The teams and the symbolic worlds they generate may be strong or weak. As Coleman (1981) showed us, schools with strong athletic cultures drag high IQ students away from focusing on strong academic achievement since like other young people they want to be successful within the symbolic universe of the school they attend. We also find that adults who have very little connection to the school still identify a great deal with the sports teams and their success. In many towns coaches and star players play an important role in the political life of the town and in aspects of the

local community that have little to do with education itself (Bissinger 2000).

Sports teams and coaches also tend to have enduring impacts on their students and as a consequence on their parents. If it is true that one function of athletics is to bind working class children and other students who are not likely to be beneficiaries of the mythology that schooling will lead to adult occupational success (Stinchcombe 1964; Jencks et al. 1972; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Rosenbaum 1976; Carr and Kefalas 2009), students from low-income backgrounds who experience athletics and then adult success may feel a special debt to high school coaches (Marx et al. 2005). You see this appreciation and loyalty if you attend a high school homecoming game and talk to parents, flipping hamburgers years after their sons and daughters have graduated from high school.

There is a dynamic of community cohesion in play here that is only partly related to the things children learn through education. If the football team wins, people in the community feel good about themselves and where they live. This is a benefit for the school district since it then is likely to be able to have its tax proposal passed and it also is likely to be able to raise money privately for its sports booster organization. It is no secret that schools try to boost their athletic success by hiring particularly capable coaches, trying to convince students who are good athletes to attend the school, and managing relations with the press. These are all high profile, easy to manipulate aspects of building sports to increase a school’s influence with its support community.

Most school districts do not have options to use these high profile ways of building their sports teams and instead depend on more laborious ways of building the community’s connection to the school. Schools may build community loyalty to the institution by offering services and facilities that are not directly connected to educational activities with children but that serve the community. The balance here is that if these efforts cost public dollars, thereby increasing tax charges, the public may not be sympathetic. In one district we worked with the superintendent raised private money to renovate

the football field, the track, and the baseball field so that he could make them available to the community for use without drawing on the school system budget. His hope was that community members would use these facilities without being involved with the school. By using the facilities people living locally might develop a stronger sense that the local area actually was a community, rather than a fragmented rural area, and that this would make them more willing to vote for a school tax increase. He was using a strategy that in other chapters (Chaps. 1, 7, 9, and 25) we have called the “community of limited liability” organizing strategy. Following their own organizational self-interest, leaders try to encourage residents of the local community to symbolically identify with the locale and as a result of that identification give support to the original organization (Milofsky and Green 2015).

Leaders of other CDOs are likely to view efforts like these as thinly disguised self-interested efforts. The head of the local women’s shelter saw the school district’s fund raising as little more than an effort to build a new football stadium without causing a tax-payer revolt. It is important in the CDO framework not to confuse the institutional efforts different hegemonic organizations make to build their enterprise with the community as a symbolic reality for residents. For the symbolic community to develop, there must be ritual, abstract, representative realities that lead residents to fuse membership in a community with their personal identities. That is different from the focus a CDO provides. When we assemble the CDOs into a collection of institutions, we legal, financial, and service providing entities that may be cold and disconnected from the meaning base of town or metropolitan area. From the CDO perspective, the community is defined in terms of a set of lead institutions rather than in terms of sentiments.

Schools perform a balancing act because in important ways they connect with the hearts of community residents. At the same time, they are self-interested organizations trying to maximize their self-interests.

## 27.3 Conclusion

In this chapter we have examined schools as one of the ubiquitous community institutions. Because schools deal directly with children, they are both operating on terrain that is immensely important in terms of the passions and concerns for families and also shaping the living space of young people who have little choice but to be controlled by the geographic space they live in.

The school is intimately connected to structures of inequality in society. Whether through the direct effects of instruction or indirect effects that come from credentializing and the advancement effects of old boy networks, schools play an important role in shaping adult opportunities. Middle class children may enjoy the benefits of social sponsorship. Low income and racially and ethnically oppressed groups often find that schools do not provide a pathway to adult success. Yet at the same time, some children do prosper and advance through the schools. One of the main reasons this happens is that they live in communities or participate in institutions like the Catholic Church that provides them with social support, encourages motivation, channels resources in their direction, and offers opportunities for social advancement (like special scholarship programs) that would not normally be available for children in their social situations.

Poor children, probably more than middle class ones, succeed in school to the extent that they are able to achieve intellectually and avoid pitfalls that come along with lacking strong and informed parental support or living in a community rich with civil society resources. These aspects of the setting of community life are unevenly distributed. Although they are thinly provided in most low-income communities, there are many places where informal civil resources are sufficiently available that poor children can find them, benefit from them, and prosper as they move into adulthood. Community settings are critically important to understand and develop if less advantaged children are to succeed through schooling.



While neighborhood settings often develop through the efforts of churches, voluntary organizations, and altruistic individuals there is also a larger agenda of community building in which schools are centrally involved. This happens partly because sports teams and other aspects of school activity have powerful symbolic meaning to community residents. These anchors of identification are among the things that lead to the symbolic creation of community. A symbolically meaningful community is one of the things that is likely to feed back to provide rich settings for children. If adults participate, children benefit.

While schools become a center of community sentiment just by being there and doing the things they do, they also self-consciously try to build communities in ways that foster their organizational fortunes. In this action, they are likely to compete with other CDOs. The other CDOs may not be able to claim resources the school system is trying to access. But they are not likely to be sympathetic if the school system tries to convince local residents to have a stronger feeling of identification with the community by drawing them into school system programs and activities. Other leaders are likely to see the school system's leaders in cynical terms and to feel that while they are trying to build their own organization that the schools are ignoring other issues that are important to residents, that shape their opportunities or affects things threatening to them, and that may do more to reinforce the status quo than to improve the overall quality of life in the community.

The schools may emphasize sports over gender equality and thereby annoy the women's center. The schools may encourage residents to drink soda and eat hamburgers at their sports events and thereby encourage obesity rather than healthy diet, thereby annoying health leaders. The schools may not develop a curriculum for poor and working class students emphasizes life skills like a proper understanding of budgeting or presenting oneself in the job market, and thereby annoy leaders of institutions like the housing authority that can only properly serve poor residents if they can manage a budget.

Communities may be symbolic constructions but they also are assemblages of fragmented service institutions that follow different agendas and different value orientations. There is no simple cohesion to be found on the institutional level. At the same time, school systems are powerful in terms of giving children and families the experience of community. They are ubiquitous and their institutional style is relatively constant across the culture and thus they are familiar to us all. They are a fundamental feature of the landscape of local communities.

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