

CHAPTER 1

A MODEL OF FAMILY AND SCHOOL CAPITAL

INTRODUCTION

One of the persistent challenges confronting societies is how to reduce inequalities in the educational and occupational attainment of students from different socioeconomic, ethnic and race group backgrounds. Such inequities are typically intensified between females and males, and for students from different residential and geographic locations. It is generally agreed that if parents are involved positively in activities associated with children's learning then the school outcomes of those children are likely to be enhanced. As a result, educational practices that address inequalities in students' attainment are designed, more and more, to involve parents in the learning experiences of their children, at home and at school.

As families and households increasingly experience disruptive and often dramatic upheavals it is not always obvious, however, how teachers should respond to optimize their relationships with parents. Coleman (1993) observes that with the changing nature of societies schools now interact more than ever with particularly varied groups of families. He suggests some parents "are deeply involved and have the skills to be effective. Others are involved, but in ways that are ineffective or harmful. And still others take little time to inculcate in their children those personal traits that facilitate the school's goals" (p. 6).

While Coleman's observation highlights the present varied nature of family involvement in schooling, it has always been the case that teachers have interacted with parents expressing dissimilar levels of interest in children's learning. What is different now is that teachers are being encouraged or directed to recognize the importance of parents as partners in the education of children. It is an expectation that such partnerships will be associated with the formation of more enriched learning environments, which in turn will be related to more positive school attitudes and associated with improvements in children's academic performance.

Lareau and Shumar (1996) reflect, however, on some of the potential unintended outcomes of parent-teacher programs. They indicate that parents from different social and cultural contexts approach schools with quite diverse expectations and interpretations of what it means for them to be educationally helpful when interacting with their children. In addition, they suggest the nature and intellectual quality of parent-teacher interactions may be affected quite significantly by teachers' perceptions of parents' backgrounds. If qualitatively different family-school relationships do develop for parents from contrasting backgrounds then it is possible, perhaps likely, that a school's attempt to promote teaching partnerships might actually be associated with an increased divergence in students' learning outcomes.

If educational policies and practices that attempt to reduce inequalities in students' attainment are to be more cogent, then we need to increase our understanding of the complexity of relationships among social and cultural contexts, family and school learning environments, students' individual characteristics and school outcomes. It is the purpose of this book to examine research that has examined the intricate nature of these relationships and to move towards the development of a theory to explain family background differences in students' school-related outcomes.

TOWARDS A CONTEXT THEORY OF STUDENTS' OUTCOMES

I have labeled the conceptual framework that is developed in the book a context theory of students' outcomes, as it explores relationships between family and school capital and the educational outcomes of students from different social and cultural contexts. It is realized, of course, that relations between families and schools vary for students in different countries and that a set of propositions applicable in one international setting may not easily be generalized to another country. Such potential differences are expressed, for example, in the vintage and evocative studies of students' reactions to schooling by Willis (1977), Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, and Dowsett (1982), and MacLeod (1987).

Willis interviewed white working-class male students from an English secondary school. In the analysis one group of males is labeled the 'lads'. They interpret the economic position of working-class families as being in opposition to occupational mobility and they respond by resisting and rejecting the achievement orientation of schooling. In addition they choose to drop out of school, define masculinity in relation to manual occupations and join their relatives in low-paying factory jobs. Connell et al., in an investigation of Australian secondary school students wanted to find out why the relationship between home and school worked so much better for middle class families. They observe that their findings indicate the need to be wary about accepting the conclusions of the Willis investigation. It is suggested that there is no simple relationship between family social background and children's orientations toward schooling. Instead, Connell et al. conclude "what impresses us most are the tensions and contradictions at play, and the range of outcomes which that interplay guarantees" (p. 79).

In an analysis of secondary school males from a low income US community, MacLeod identifies two groups labeled as 'The Brothers' (mainly black students) and 'The Hallway Hangers' (predominantly white). Although the students in the two groups have similar socioeconomic backgrounds they respond differently to those conditions. The white Hallway Hangers, as did the lads in the Willis study, resist and reject the achievement ideology of schooling. In contrast the black Brothers accept the goals of schooling and continue to express high educational aspirations. MacLeod indicates that the parents of the Brothers have high expectations for their sons and monitor their schoolwork, while the parents of Hallway Hangers are not involved actively in their sons' schooling. Mehan (1992) observes that the Hallway Hangers and Brothers show that students from similar

economic circumstances respond to “structures of domination in diverse and unpredictable ways...we must first, broaden the theory of reproduction to include social agency and second, broaden the notion of social class to include cultural elements, such as ethnicity, educational histories, peer associations and family life” (p. 9).

Such investigations emphasize the need to be cautious when attempting to present a set of propositions that might be examined in different international settings. One of the purposes of developing the theoretical framework, however, is to broaden our understanding of the relationships among families, schools and educational outcomes. In addition it is hoped that the theory, or parts of it, will be tested in various national settings to examine whether the propositions are supported for students from quite diverse family backgrounds and in countries that differ in their educational systems.

FAMILY AND SCHOOL CAPITAL: THEORY CONSTRUCTION

GENERAL PERSPECTIVE

An initial and general theoretical perspective suggests that families and schools can be considered as being embedded in social and cultural contexts that affect children’s eventual life chances. Such contexts may be designated as opportunity structures. Blau (1990) proposes that these structures constrain many individuals from realizing their educational and occupational choices while they expand such opportunities for others. In an extension of Blau’s general proposition, Furlong, Biggart, and Cartmel (1996) claim that “while an individual’s location within the class structure, as well as gender or racial inequalities, affect the life chances of all young people, irrespective of their social location, it can be argued that contexts potentially magnify or dilute the effects of individual attributes” (p. 552).

Building upon this general perspective, I examine in this chapter a number of theoretical orientations that explore associations between family and school capital and students’ attainment. I have selected five conceptual approaches that supplement one another and provide a progression in our understanding of how learning environments relate to students’ performance. The five approaches are (a) Bourdieu’s analysis of relationships among economic and cultural capital, individuals’ dispositions and academic success, (b) Coleman’s analysis of associations between human and social capital and school outcomes, (c) Stanton-Salazar’s network analysis of social capital, (d) Steinberg’s investigation of relations among refined measures of social capital and (e) Bronfenbrenner and Ceci’s model of human development that examines relations among distal and immediate settings, individuals’ characteristics and educational performance. From these orientations, certain features are chosen to construct a model of family-school influences that I use in later chapters to examine relationships among measures of family and school capital and students’ school-related outcomes.

SPECIFIC THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS

Economic and Cultural Capital: Bourdieu's Orientation

In the development of a theory of the social trajectory of individuals, Bourdieu (1984, 1998) presents a two-dimensional model of social space. The overall volume of economic and cultural capital possessed by individuals or available to them defines the vertical dimension. In contrast, the horizontal dimension indicates the structure of individuals' capital and it is assessed by the relative amounts of economic and cultural capital within the total volume of their capital. While economic capital refers to financial resources and assets, cultural capital includes (a) those tastes and habits acquired by individuals as they grow up in different family and school settings, (b) cultural objects such as paintings, antiques and books accumulated by individuals or families and (c) formal educational qualifications attained by individuals (see Anheier, Gerhards, & Romo, 1995).

The social space defined by capital volume and the structure of capital is considered to establish a set of relational oppositions between individuals in different social positions. On the vertical dimension the theory suggests that industrialists and curators of large museums, for example, who have high overall capital volume are opposed to unskilled workers who are deprived of economic capital and those forms of cultural capital related to educational and occupational success. In relation to the structure of capital it is proposed that museum curators who are likely to be wealthier in cultural than in economic capital, are opposed to industrialists who are assumed to be relatively wealthier in economic than in cultural capital. That is, social spaces are structures of differences in social positions and these differences reflect variations in the kinds of capital that are important in particular educational and occupational fields. It is claimed that the closer individuals are to one another in their social positions the more they have in common in tastes, preferences, opinions, lifestyles and educational opportunities.

In discussing his own research orientations, Bourdieu proposes that for an enhanced understanding of social problems and for the enriched development of theoretical perspectives, there should be a fusion of theory construction and practical research concerns (see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). I have adopted this idea of an interpenetration of theoretical and empirical analyses throughout the book as I move towards the construction of the context theory. As the first example of that fusion of analyses I examine in the following section Bourdieu's concept of social space.

Bourdieu's Concept of Social Space: An Empirical Analysis. In this analysis I examine the general proposition that early family positions can be defined by the volume of economic and cultural capital available to children and by the structure of that capital. For the investigation I examine autobiographies of authors to locate individuals in social spaces defined by their reminiscences of early family experiences. I am aware that autobiographies can describe overly romantic or dramatic representations of the past. In addition they may omit important material and reflect a rather selective recall of events and experiences. While the complete

analysis of texts includes over 100 autobiographies that describe in detail individuals' recollections of family life it is only possible to present here a particularly small sample of narratives. Despite these reservations about narrative analyses of autobiographies the investigation is presented to provide an initial portrayal of relations between the different forms of capital available to children, to explore in greater detail some of Bourdieu's concepts and to begin the interaction between conceptual and empirical analyses as I move towards the construction of a context theory of students' school outcomes.

In the textual analysis of the autobiographies, independent assessments of family economic and cultural capital were made and framed on scales ranging from modest to particularly enriched. Family economic capital is related to indications in the texts of parents' occupations and family financial assets. Cultural capital is assessed by references to children's access to books; visits to museums, galleries and the theatre; and participation in literary and artistic activities. Although these latter indicators represent a circumscribed definition of cultural capital they are used here as they are the types of experiences and activities adopted by Bourdieu and his colleagues in their research. After the framing of economic and cultural capital, the resulting overall capital volume is classified as ranging from limited to abundant.

During the analysis it became apparent that some of the authors recalled with much appreciation the support and encouragement they received from parents and other adults. Although not a formal dimension in Bourdieu's definition of social space, adult-child interactions are included in the present study and framed on scales ranging from weak to very supportive. From the larger investigation, the following narratives are selected from the autobiographies of Harry Crews, Catherine Cookson, Janet Frame, Agatha Christie and Nicholas Monsarrat, as they reveal the variations that are present in children's access to early family capital.

Harry Crews (1979) was born in Bacon County, Georgia, the son of a poor share farmer. He recounts:

The world that circumscribed the people I come from had so little margin for error, for bad luck, that when something went wrong, it almost always brought something else down with it. (p. 40)

When he discusses his earliest literary experiences, Crews recalls how he and his young friend Willalee Bokatee devoted hours to reading Sears, Roebuck catalogues and how they created stories about the people in those catalogues. He remembers:

Making up stories, it seems to me now, was not only a way for us to understand the way we lived but also a defense against it. It was no doubt the first step in a life devoted primarily to men and women and children who never lived anywhere but in my imagination. (p. 57)

Crews recalls with great appreciation the warm support he received from Willalee's family:

God knows what it would have been like if it had not been for Willalee and his people. I am convinced Willalee's grandma, Auntie, made the best part of me. Auntie made me believe in a discoverable world, but that most of what we discover is an unfathomable mystery. (p. 62)

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