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Listening to the Voices of Family Members, Teachers, and Community Members

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Abstract

This study investigates the interrelationships between and among family members and community members who work with middle level children, and middle level teachers from the perspectives of these participants. All three groups are viewed as integral members, with equal standing, in a complex ecological system, the purpose of which is to support early adolescents' academic achievement and healthy development throughout school and life. The findings provide insights to how family members, community members who work with middle level children, and teachers view their role in working with each other.

Three areas were identified that influence the participants' perceptions of their roles in working together: The degree of the development of the relationship itself and two problematic areas that need attention to improve the relationship—lack of communication and negotiation of value conflicts.

Research Agenda Issues

In 1996 the National Middle School Association (NMSA) established a "Blue Ribbon" Research Agenda Task Force to develop a middle level education research agenda (National Middle School Association, 2001). The following topics identified in the NMSA Research Agenda are included in this study:

- Educators Committed to Young Adolescents
 - Learning Communities for Educators and Parents
 - Parenting/Family Involvement
 - Opportunities for Adult/Student Interaction
 - Student/Adult Relationships
- A Shared Vision
 - Community-Wide Development
- Family and Community Partnerships
 - Parent Involvement/Parent Commitment
 - Community and Business Partnerships
 - School Contributions to the Community

Introduction

The importance of increasing community, family, and school partnerships at the middle level is stressed by prominent researchers including Epstein and Connors (1993), Epstein and Dauber (1989), and Swap (1993). Partnerships between teachers, family members, and community members are described by Swap (1993) as encompassing a new vision for relationships. Partnerships involve formal relationships, developed over time, and are characterized by an equal standing among the partners. Epstein (1995) points out that an important factor in developing "true" partnerships between families, schools, and communities is rethinking traditional roles and relationships. The partners work toward shared goals, contributing strengths and assets, sharing information, and supporting each other in assisting students to succeed in school and life.

Many research papers and reports call for increased family and community involvement at the middle level. Significant reports including *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), three reports by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989, 1992, 1995) and *This We Believe... And Now We Must Act* (National Middle School Association, 2001) identify family and community support of children as paramount to increasing academic achievement and sustaining their healthy development. Numerous researchers have identified ways that family and community involvement benefits children including Bickel, 1995; Connors & Epstein, 1995; Davies, 1991; Epstein & Connors, 1993; Flaxman & Inger, 1992; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Hidalgo, Siu, Bright, Swap, & Epstein, 1995; Hopfenberg et al., 1993; Moore, 1991; National PTA, 1993; Riley, 1994; and Rutherford, Billig, & Kettering, 1993. In addition, Patricia George in *No Child Left Behind: Implications for Middle Level Leaders* (2002) mentions that NCLB "provides increased opportunities for parent involvement" (p. 23).

However, despite the overwhelming research indicating that family and community involvement is beneficial for children, partnerships between community members, family members, and teachers are difficult to establish and maintain. As Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) point out, the development of alliances and partnerships can be "a messy, frustrating, conflict ridden, and time consuming business" (p. 62). Differing perceptions of the roles of family members, middle level teachers, and community members challenge the formation of partnerships (Cibulka & Kritek, 1996; Parkay & Stanford, 1992; Pratt, 1994). Perceptions and attitudes may differ dramatically between and among the family members, teachers, and community. This condition is exacerbated when teachers and family members come from different cultures, races, or class backgrounds (Chavkin, 1993b; Epstein & Dauber, 1989).

Much of the research regarding partnerships has been from the school's perspective. Epstein (1993), and Swap (1993) have called for a vision of partnerships where the education of children is viewed as a joint effort between family members, community members, and schools. However, Ginn (1994) pointed out that research on family involvement focuses on the perspective of educators, and that families are "Somewhat depersonalized; they are 'objectified'; it is difficult to think of parents as living, breathing humans or know what involvement means for them" (p. 39).

The same point could be made regarding research on teachers and community members who work with middle level children. The theoretical framework used in this study, the ecological model of human development, facilitates movement away from our current way of thinking, which disembodies family members, community members, and teachers. The ecological model helps us to view family members, community members, and teachers as "living, breathing humans" who fill multiple roles. An overview of the Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development, which forms the theoretical framework for this study, follows.

Theoretical Framework

Family, school, and community influences on student achievement and healthy development in this study are shaped by the overarching theoretical framework of an ecological model of human development formulated by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and applied by Connors and Epstein (1995), Epstein (1995), and Epstein and Connors (1993) in the overlapping spheres of influence model. Bronfenbrenner identified four systems of

interrelationships that influence human development. He describes the systems as being nested within each other like a set of Russian dolls. The systems are (a) the microsystem, (b) the mesosystem, (c) the exosystem, and (d) the macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner's model focuses on the child and the influences these systems have on the child. When examining how the child's involvement with spheres of influence (family, school, and community) actually influences achievement and healthy development, Bronfenbrenner's model provides a framework to consider the interactions within the systems and between the systems and their influence on the child (see Appendix A, Figure 1, to see a diagram of the interrelationships between the systems).

This research inquiry is focused on examining relationships between three of the child's microsystem groups: family members, teachers, and community members who have direct contact with the middle level child. When these groups have direct interactions with the child they are in the child's microsystem. However, when the groups interact with each other they are acting as members of the child's mesosystem. By listening to the voices of family members, teachers and community members, this study sheds light on their perspectives regarding what they believe their role should be in working with each other to benefit middle level children. Knowledge regarding what information and support are needed by all three groups to encourage participation in partnerships will help facilitate the establishment of partnerships at the middle level.

The Research Questions and Design

Research done by Lipsitz, Mizell, Jackson, and Austin (1997) has shed some light on issues specific to family involvement at middle schools that are implementing a middle school philosophy based on the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) recommendations. However, little is known regarding issues specific to the development of true partnerships between family members, middle level teachers, and community members. This study brings together the perceptions of all three groups—family members, middle level teachers, and community members who work directly with middle level children. The perceptions of members of each group regarding their relationships with each other have not been examined at the middle level from a perspective that views all three groups as integral parts of a complex ecological system with equal standing.

Research Questions

The guiding research questions are

1. What are the perceptions of family members, community members, and teachers regarding their *current* roles in working with each other to benefit middle level students?
2. What are the perceptions of family members, community members, and teachers regarding what their roles *should* be in working with each other to benefit middle level students?

Theoretical Orientation of the Research Design

Symbolic interactionism is an orientation to the study of human behavior that views actions as being mediated by the interpretation people give their life-situations in interacting with others. Human life is seen as community life and, as such, cannot be understood apart from the community of which the people are a member (Prus, 1996).

The philosophical and theoretical perspectives of symbolic interactionism support the qualitative research paradigm (Patton, 1987). In qualitative research the ways people interpret their experience are especially significant (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Family members, teachers, and community members come with differing backgrounds and experiences that influence their perceptions and therefore, other interpretations of actions and relationships. The nature of this research inquiry, to study the perceptions of family members, community members, and teachers regarding their current roles and how they perceive their roles should be in working with each other to benefit middle level students, can best be explored using qualitative research methods.

Method and Data Analysis

Data was derived from focus groups, which were audio taped; field notes generated during recruitment of participants; visits to the community and school; a researcher-prepared questionnaire; and review of school documents and archival records.

Focus groups work particularly well in determining the perceptions, feelings, and manner of thinking of the participants (Krueger, 1994). A research design using focus groups was chosen as the most appropriate method of collecting data in regard to the research question.

A total of six focus group meetings were held; three with family members, one with community members, and two with middle level teachers. All members of the focus groups were associated with the same middle level school. The same moderator and assistant moderator were at each meeting. The moderator used a focus group guide to provide a structure for the analysis of the data and to provide consistency across the focus groups. The focus groups were audio taped and the assistant moderator recorded field notes.

Participant verification of the data was done using the methods suggested by Krueger (1994). The assistant moderator gave a brief summary of the major points made by the participants toward the end of each meeting. The participants were then asked if they had anything to add or change.

The analysis of data followed the methods suggested by the researchers Krueger (1994), Miles and Huberman (1994), and Patton (1987). Content analyses of group data, transcripts, and field notes were used to identify themes, important examples, and patterns in the data. Categories of emerging themes were developed.

Participants in the Study and the Setting

All participants in the focus groups were associated as a family member, teacher, or community volunteer with River Middle School. River Middle School is located in a suburban town located in the Portland, Oregon metropolitan area. The community has a predominately middle socio-economic level with a median household income higher than that of the state as a whole. Of the 895 students attending River Middle School in 1997 85.70% were white, 6.41% Hispanic, 6.17% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.37% African American, and .35% other.

The River Middle School principal provided a list of possible participants in the specific categories of family members with children in middle school, community volunteers who work with middle level students, and middle level teachers. Several of the participants fit into multiple categories. Sixty-six percent of the community members participating in the focus group have children who are either in middle level school or have completed middle school. Of the 12 teachers that participated in the two focus groups, seven have children in middle school, high school, college, or who are adults. Thus, 58.33% of the teachers have experience as family members with middle level children. As Moles (1993) and Lightfoot (1978) pointed out, teachers are often parents, many are single parents, and face the same difficulties in life as their students' families and community members.

Findings

The six focus groups produced a wealth of information illuminating how family members, community members, and teachers view their role in working with each other to benefit middle level children's healthy development. Three areas that shape the participants' perceptions of their roles in working together emerged from the data: (a) the degree of development of relationships between family members, community members, and teachers; (b) lack of communication; and (c) value conflicts.

Relationships Between Family Members, Community Members, and Teachers

The term "relationship" implies that there is an association that continues over a period of time and that the parties in the association are linked together by a relatively stable set of expectations (Vander Zanden, 1996, p. 101). (See Appendix B, Table 1 that shows an overview of the degrees of interactions, the perception of the characteristics, and quality of the relationships among the participant groups.) As seen in Table 1, the context of the relationship plays an important role in the development of relationships.

The influence of the context of the activity on relationships. The context, where the contact takes place, and the type of contact appears to influence the development of relationships. Table 1 shows that both the family focus groups and the teacher focus groups desire to have opportunities to build relationships in informal social settings. Some representative comments made by family members and teachers are given below.

Larry, who has a son at the middle school but does not regularly volunteer at the school, was involved in a work party. He described it being "Kind of pseudo team building, if you will ... Getting to know the teacher in maybe a little less tense environment." Terry, who has one child at the middle school and one child in high school, also sees the value of informal contact in a social setting. He related that he was at a school play and he had an opportunity to talk to teachers in an informal manner, which helped to establish a relationship. "This was a social setting. There may be something to just having a social event, a gathering event, that helps in establishing a relationship. Not because you have an issue, but just to establish a relationship."

The teachers also mentioned the value of informal setting to build relationships. Carl, a teacher with 33 years experience at the middle level teaching social studies and coaching, mentioned the importance of establishing opportunities for informal contacts by establishing activities that will provide family members and teachers with increased opportunities for interactions to develop relationships. Carl said; "Parents are more comfortable coming in if their child is performing in the orchestra ... or playing basketball ... Then you interact with them and it is a very comfortable interaction, as opposed to walking into a classroom where they are somewhat intimidated."

The teachers' perception of relationships with local community members as shown in Table 1, appears to depend on the context of the activity and the amount of interaction between the teachers and community members. Teachers and community members who provide opportunities for service-learning activities have developed relationships that are described as "good." Flora, a teacher for 14 years relates, "... We did a service project with [a community agency] ... I was extremely pleased with their response to our students."

Both teachers and community members who are involved in activities such as Scouting and 4-H indicate that they have very little contact with each other and thus no relationship. Marvin, a teacher with three years experience, made a representative comment; "I don't see them. I don't know who they are." The lack of a relationship poses challenges for members of all three groups.

Consequences of a lack of relationship. The lack of relationships between teachers and community members results in family members having difficulty finding activities for their children. Members of all three groups expressed that teachers are not aware of community-based activities for middle level children.

Caroline, a middle level teacher with four years of experience, made a statement that is an example from the teachers' conversation. The teachers were discussing their lack of knowledge regarding community programs and she said:

I have had many parents who would like to know ... what is it that my kid can get involved in? I have had a lot of parents ask me that. But I don't have very many things to tell them.

Community members share the impression that teachers are not aware of what activities are available for children. George, a 4-H leader, made a representative comment. "I would ... guess that half of the teachers out there are not aware, or even if they were, have no idea how to get into contact with some of the [community] groups." Bertha, who is a parent of two middle level children, related the difficulty she faced when looking for activities for her children "It is more work for the parents ... to look to [find] extracurricular activities." The lack of relationships and resulting lack of communication between teachers and community members who work directly with children create challenges for parents. It is clear from the focus group discussions that the lack of relationships between all three groups results in a lack of communication.

Communication

The need for improved communication emerged as a major theme in all of the focus group discussions. Family members, community members, and teachers see that improved communication between the groups is needed to improve relationships.

Wood (1982) defines communication as "a dynamic, systemic process in which communicators construct personal meanings through their symbolic interactions" (p. 20). Individual meaning derived from communication is based on the individuals' past experiences and the ways of interpreting others. Communication happens over time and evolves out of previous interactions and earlier encounters. The more developed the relationship between the people involved in communicating, the more easily they can communicate with each other. Interactions and familiarity allow people to know what to expect from each other and make communication easier and, according to Wood (1989), more satisfying.

Teachers and family members both feel it is their role to communicate with each other. The following representative statements provide an overview of the focus groups conversations. Katie, a family member actively involved with the school said, "Our [the family members'] responsibility is to be chief communicator. We need to initiate it ... "However, family members also believe that the teachers are responsible for communication with them regarding more than just grades. Bertha, a parent of two middle school children, believes it is the teacher's responsibility to keep families informed, including information about the "good things." "Often if you have a child that is doing fine, you only hear that at conference time. It is kind of nice, and it is nice for the child to be told, 'Hey, you are doing really good.'"

Teachers agree with the importance of clear communication with family members. Ed, who has taught for 27 years, believes that teachers need to make family members feel welcome and that communication is the key to the relationship. "Communication is a key ... Always give them [family members] that welcome sign." However, teachers also indicated some frustration with some family members who would not communicate with them. Marvin discussed family members who avoided his attempts to communicate because " ... they dodge my phone calls, or don't come to conference nights, or anything like that."

Lack of time impedes communication between teachers and family members. Anne Ly, a teacher with 27 years of experience, expressed that the teachers' workload presents an obstacle to communicating with family members. "Time. We don't have time ... All of us are stretched to the absolute max. Every single person in our building is stretched to the absolute max." Family members also expressed concern regarding the teachers' workload. Sharleen, a parent of one middle school child, said, "The sheer number alone has got to be tremendous. I mean to try to contact every parent that you [the teachers] need to, there is just not enough time to do that." Bertha, the mother of two middle school children, pointed out that time is also an obstacle for family members. Several members of the focus group agreed with her when she said "If I wasn't working I would be volunteering or doing something. You know sometimes it is just a matter of what you can fit into your schedule and into your life."

Both teachers and community members indicate that there is little communication between the groups and believe communication should be at the program level and should focus on supporting their own program. Patrick, who coaches the community soccer team, believes that communication does not need to be between community volunteers and teachers but that the teachers can support the community programs by providing information to the children. "Information is given for registration to the office. It is an activity that is incredibly inexpensive ... yet a lot of kids never know that it exists because it [the registration form] never leaves the office."

Teachers want the community members to support the school programs and to be aware of happenings at school. Karie, who has 13 years of experience teaching, mentioned, "I think there needs to be more communication and willingness on their part [community members] to support the school programs." Carrie, with 15 years of experience teaching, stated, "I think it would be nice if they were aware of what's going on in school."

The myopic view expressed by the teachers and the community members that focus only on their own programs rather than on the needs of the child, contributed to the third area of the findings, the need to negotiate value (perception) conflicts to build relationships to enable family members, teachers, and community members to work together in partnerships.

Value Conflicts

The participants in the focus groups indicated that there are value conflicts between three members of the child's Microsystem—teachers, family members, and community members. In addition, all three groups express concerns about the influence of the TV, Internet, and media microsystem on children. The findings regarding value conflicts are pressed in two parts. First, value conflicts among family members, teachers, and community members are discussed. Second, concerns regarding the values transmitted to children by the media, the Internet, and society in general are presented.

Value conflicts among family members, teachers, and community members. There are philosophical disagreements by teachers and family members with some community programs that result in value conflicts. Carl, a teacher and coach at River Middle School for 33 years, explained the philosophical disagreements he has with some community programs:

Oftentimes the school philosophically disagrees with how some of these organizations are being run ... We see them as being kind of 'win' focused, very narrow focused, an elitist-type organization, and so the relationships with the school are not very good ... I think there is an adversarial relationship in many cases between the school and some of our community programs. It is not a welcoming environment. (Carl)

Gino also expressed concern about the purpose of an out-of-school sports program. He said, "I have a sense that the coach [of the community program] is going to make a mean machine out of my kid, and I really don't want a mean machine for a kid" (Gino, parent with one child at the middle school).

Community members also recognize that there are value conflicts between their organizations and the school and some family members. Carla, who is a recreation director at a care center, and Patrick, a coach in a community program, both mentioned that they sometimes feel that parents take advantage of them and view them as a free baby-sitter. "I find it almost like baby-sitting. And I have said that to parents, "You know, I am not a baby-sitter" (Carla). James, a Scoutmaster, who acknowledges that conflict said, "How do you get teachers to indicate ... the Boy Scout movement, when the Boy Scout movement has religious beliefs ... Duty to God ... It is there. It is not going to change."

Concerns regarding the media, the Internet, and society in general. All three groups, teachers, family members and community members expressed concern regarding the influence of media and society in general on children. Bronfenbrenner did not include the media as a part of the microsystem because at the time it was not a direct setting for two-way interactions, nor did he include cyberspace because children did not commonly use it in 1979. However, when discussing working together to support children, all three groups expressed concern that values that conflict with their own beliefs are being transmitted to their children by television, the Internet, the media, and society in general. Some representative comments are:

"The Internet has more explicit stuff and violence than parents are aware of. They are in a high-tech world and we haven't gotten on board yet. And they [children] know that, too" (Katie, parent of one child at middle school). "The standards that are communicated to kids where they spend a good portion of the time ... right in front of the television set. That's where I point the finger" (Elmore, a teacher with four years of experience). " ... It is just amazing what they [middle level children] are being exposed to at such an early age" (George, church youth group leader).

Concerns with media and the Internet are outside the boundaries of this study, which examines partnerships between family members, teachers, and community members. However, the influence of media and the Internet are major concerns for all three groups (the topic emerged in every focus group session!) and thus it must be included if we are truly listening to the voices of family members, teachers, and community members.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of family members, community members, and middle level teachers regarding their relationships with each other from a perspective that views all three groups as integral parts of a complex ecological system with equal standing. The purpose for developing relationships is to support children's academic achievement and healthy development, not just in school, but also in life.

The findings provide insights into how family members, community members, and teachers view their roles in working with each other. How the participants view their roles and responsibilities working with children appear to shape how they see their roles in working with other adults.

Not surprisingly, the family members are primarily concerned with their own child. They believe that their role is to support their children by communicating with teachers and community leaders of groups in which their children participate. Some family members also believe their role is to be actively involved at school and in the community groups, but most indicate that they are not. Overall, however, contradictions exist between what family members say they believe their role should be and how they actually act out their role.

Generally, the community members' focus is also on the child as their major concern. Community members believe their responsibility with children is to be a good role model and to provide a safe environment. Yet, with teachers, community members see their appropriate role as being focused at the program level, with teachers providing information regarding their program. In addition, community members indicate that teachers do not have time to meet the needs of all children and that teachers need to rely on community groups outside the school to make sure that children's needs are being met.

Teachers clearly believe that their major responsibility is to teach children the curriculum and the teachers' focus is on test scores, not community programs. However, teachers see that they have a responsibility to establish communication with family members and to maintain a welcoming atmosphere for community members. While emphasizing academic achievement, teachers also indicate they feel a responsibility to educate the "whole child," and they participate in numerous programs and activities that involve families and community members such as plays at school and service-learning activities in the community. In the teacher focus group discussions, I received the impression that the teachers felt overwhelmed by what they see as expectations placed on them by family members, the school district, the state, and society. Those expectations, while designed to help children, are seen by the teachers as interfering with what they think of as their primary role—to "teach" children.

Factors that Influence Participants' Perceptions

In the findings three areas were identified that shape the participants' perceptions of their roles in working together: The degree of the development of the relationship itself and two problematic areas that need to be negotiated to improve the relationship—the lack of communication and value conflicts. The case of relations between community members and teachers is used to explore this dynamic, followed by a discussion of areas of negotiation—communication and value conflicts.

Relations between community members and teachers

This case represents a particularly undeveloped relationship that holds great promise for improving partnerships. It is evident from the teachers' discussions that when they think of "community members," they picture two distinct groups. The relationships between the teachers and these two groups are characterized by differing frequencies of interactions. One group is comprised of community members who work with children under the guidance of the school such as service learning partners and guest speakers. Teachers have interactions with community members in this group and see them as supplementing and supporting the school curriculum.

From the teachers' standpoint, the second group is community members who work with children outside of the sphere of the school (Boy Scouts, 4-H, church groups, and coaches in community based sports programs).

When asked specifically about community members involved with Boy Scouts, church groups, 4-H, and so on, the teachers indicated that they knew there were groups in the community; however, they did not know what they were and did not know how to refer families to them. In relationships between teachers and community group leaders where there are limited interactions, issues dealing with communication and value conflicts appear to be especially problematic. The teachers clearly believe that the school district bears the responsibility to develop relationships with community groups, not the individual teachers. If the district were to take up this responsibility, many of the conflicts in teacher-community member relationships could be dealt with at the program and administrative level.

Areas of negotiation—communication and value conflicts. The lack of communication and value conflicts emerged as areas of concern across the three participant groups. These areas appear to be especially problematic between coaches in community programs and family members, and between community members and teachers, and some community members and family members. On the one hand, both the coaches in community programs and the service learning coordinator think that family members see them as a "baby-sitting service" and as such, infer that family members do not value the activity for the benefit it gives children. On the other hand, family members indicate that value conflicts between coaches and family members can make communication difficult and strain relationships. The inability of the parties to negotiate problems arising from the lack of communication and value conflicts can end the relationship. If the intensity in the relationship becomes too great, family members do not allow their children to participate in the activity.

These tensions did not surface in the discussions of relationships where frequent interactions and shared values are the norm (i.e., between church groups and family members). In family member/community member relationships that are more distant, such as between some family members and coaches, lack of communication and value conflicts are seen as causing tensions and stress. Again the family member would appear to have power in the relationship. If the difference cannot be negotiated, the family member can remove the child from the activity.

Issues dealing with the lack of communication between some teachers and family members raised the perspective that some teachers also see family members acting from a position of power. This supports the finding of Lightfoot (1978) that teachers often feel they have to protect themselves from family members. As Epstein (1993) pointed out, relationships based on power, which often lead to conflicts, need to be reformed to develop relationships based on equality and caring. To do this, interactions between the participant groups must take place so that relationships that facilitate communication can develop.

All three participant groups desire increased communication with the other groups. Increased interactions and development of relationships in informal settings are seen by teachers and family members as a way to improve communication. The types of informal interactions mentioned are activities that include the children, such as school plays. Yet, there appears to be a contradiction between the perception of the lack of time by family members and teachers and the desire for more frequent informal interactions. It may be that teachers and family members are willing to spend time attending activities if these activities are directly related to supporting and celebrating children's accomplishments in a positive, informal setting.

Finally, all three participant groups believe that values transmitted to children by society in general negatively influence children's healthy development. One way to combat the influence of negative factors such as those from the so called larger community, from value conflicts, and from power struggles between individuals and groups in the local community is for family members, community members, and teachers to work on developing a sense of a common purpose and supportive actions for each other. Through the development of a sense of community, facilitated by all participant groups, a common ground can be developed to foster the development of partnerships to support the academic achievement and healthy development of middle level children.

Reconceptualization of Relationships

In conclusion, this study offers a reconceptualization of relationships based on empirical analysis and earlier theoretical work by Bronfenbrenner. Using an ecological model as the basis for examining roles and relationships between and among family members, community members, and teachers (shown in Figure 1), this study provides a new perspective on problems associated with developing partnerships for both study and action.

The ecological model based on Bronfenbrenner's framework facilitates movement away from our current way of thinking about partnerships, which often disembodies family members, community members, and teachers. An ecological model helps us to view family members, community members, and teachers as "living, breathing humans" who fill multiple roles, from the child's perspective. "From the child's perspective," in this case, means literally through the child's eyes. Who does the child see when a teacher is referred to? Who does the child see when the church group leader is referred to? Who does the child see when a family member is referred to? The child sees specific individuals who play important roles in her or his life.

Based on the finding of this study—including the importance of the development of relationships between actors in the child's mesosystem, needs for improved communication, and the negotiation of value conflicts—I call for a vision of partnerships where the education of children is viewed as a joint effort between members of the child's mesosystem, each member working as a collaborative partner, valuing the contributions of the others, and working together with the goal of supporting children. To establish a context where this goal can be met, participants in a potential partnership need to make a paradigm shift so as to recognize the importance of the contributions of all members of the child's mesosystem to the child's healthy development. Through the development of partnerships based on equality and caring, all parties in the child's mesosystem can better contribute to the child's academic success and healthy development.

Recommendations for Further Research

In this study the most important voice, that of the child is missing. Further research needs to be done on partnerships at the middle level that include the children's voices.

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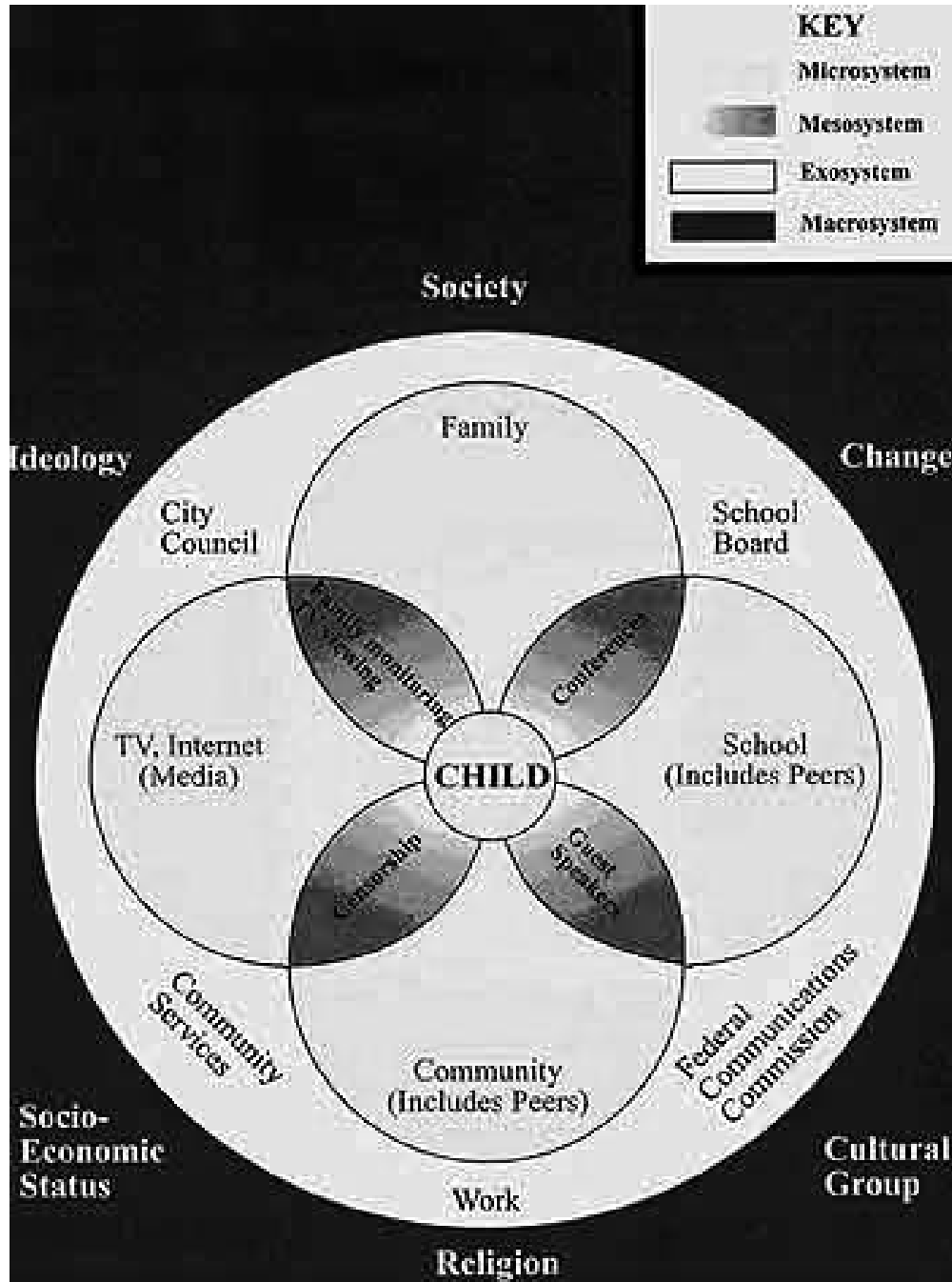
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Appendix A

The interactions within and between the systems of an ecological model of human development. Based on concepts from Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Berns (1989).



Appendix B

Perceptions of the Relationships Between Family Members, Community Members, and Teachers

	Family M -> Teachers	Teachers -> Family M	Community M -> Family M	Family M -> Community M	Community M -> Teachers	Teachers -> Community M
DEGREES OF INTERACTIONS	Instrumental ties—secondary relationships; Would like opportunities for informal interactions.	Instrumental ties—secondary relationships; Would like opportunities for informal interactions.	Shaped by context; Expressive ties—primary relationships with church group; scouts; Instrumental with others	Shaped by context; Expressive ties—primary relationships with scouts; sports for some; Instrumental for others	Little interaction: Secondary relationships	Shaped by context: Service Learning—Instrumental ties Others little interaction
PERCEPTIONS OF THE QUALITY AND CHARACTERISTICS OF RELATIONSHIPS	Good	Good to very good with most family M Bad with family M who do not communicate	Shaped by context: With Scout & church group families = good 4-H mixed Service Learning poor to good with active families Sports = negative/baby sitting service	More relaxed than with teachers Intense with some coaches	Shaped by context: Community members who are not coaches = no relationship Service Learning = some good Coach = many teachers do not care; however it runs the gamut; some great T, some poor T	Shaped by context: Service Learning partners = good Coaches = adversarial 4-H, Scouting = no relationship