

# SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES: Ecological and Institutional Dimensions

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■ **Abstract** Research on the relationship between schools and communities has reemerged as a principal focus of the sociology of education. Current research, however, rejects earlier conceptualizations of school communities as being organized locally and identifiable by reference to demographic and neighborhood characteristics. Neoinstitutional research on schools has focused examination instead on school communities defined as *organizational fields*. From this perspective, state regulation, professional associations, and market competition are institutional forces that combine with local neighborhood characteristics to shape school-level practices. The historical development of this theoretical approach is first discussed; current research on neighborhood effects is then critiqued for ignoring how schools vary in response to institutional environments; finally, examples of the utility of a broader institutional conceptualization of community are suggested in five current areas of educational research: racial segregation, resource inequality, curriculum variation, school-to-work transitions, and school discipline.

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the school and the community has reemerged as a principal focus of sociological research on schooling. While this renewed interest in explicating the multifaceted and reciprocally formative connections between schools and communities continues a long history of sociological investigation of the topic, recent research has attempted to respecify and redefine what is meant by a school community. This redefinition has emphasized political, institutional, and network dimensions of community-school relationships. Critical in this reformulation has been neoinstitutional research in the sociology of organizations. Neoinstitutionalists argue that schools are embedded not simply in local ecological communities, but more importantly in larger organizational communities. Organizational communities are what neoinstitutionalists refer to as *organizational fields*, and these comprise the set of institutions that are either directly

connected to a school (e.g., a regulating agency, a union association, a professional school) or share a structurally equivalent position (e.g., public schools—and to a lesser extent private schools—in the same state).<sup>1</sup> Neoinstitutionalists place particular focus on state regulation and how organizations are embedded in these larger, nonlocal environments. From this perspective, educational practices are more a reflection of a school's institutional community (e.g., state regulatory agencies, professional associations, training organizations, and market competition) than of a school's neighborhood demographic community (Meyer 1994, Scott 1994, DiMaggio & Powell 1983, 1991). Neoinstitutional educational research, therefore, offers an explicit challenge to traditional ecological educational research, which has conceptualized schools as being embedded primarily in localized community settings (see e.g., Bronfenbrenner 1979). Schools are organizations, and as such their communities are by definition largely institutional in character.

Reformulation of conceptualizations of community-school relationships has occurred in the context of renewed interest in the study of the role of neighborhoods in reproducing social inequality and generating crime. Current research on the role of communities in generating poverty, inequality, deviance, and crime, however, has largely relied on a sociological conceptualization of neighborhood ecological effects that was developed in the first half of the twentieth century (Park 1916, Shaw & McKay 1942). This research has focused on demographic and social organization within neighborhoods but has largely ignored variation in the structure of schooling and the organizational environment of schools that has produced institutional variation. The emergence of renewed but reformulated analyses of schools and communities is evident in many areas, including investigations of racial segregation, resource inequality, curriculum variation, school-to-work transitions, and school disciplinary climates. The changing conceptualization of school-community relationships is not just the result of abstract theoretical developments; it also reflects the changing ways communities and schools are organized and constituted.

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<sup>1</sup>Neoinstitutionalists have argued that organizational fields “identify communities of organizations that participate in the same meaning systems, are defined by similar symbolic processes, and are subject to common regulatory processes” (Scott 1994:71). In population ecology research, Hannan and Freeman (1989) have referred to the “community ecology of organizations.” They note: “A community of organizations is a set of interacting populations. Some analysts refer to such communities as organizational fields (Warren 1967) or as societal sectors (Meyer and Scott 1983). A typical community of organizations in industrial settings is composed of populations of firms, populations of labor unions, and populations of regulatory agencies” (pp. 14–15). Research in the sociology of education on schools as organizations has been influenced more directly by neoinstitutional theory than population ecology. When an ecological perspective emerges in sociology of education research, it is generally focused on local demographically defined and organized communities, rather than on institutions as defined by population ecology as understood in the sociology of organizations.

## SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES: Prior Conceptualizations

Public schools in the United States emerged in many respects at the local level; well into the twentieth century they were also largely controlled and funded by local government. Discussions of schooling, therefore, could not avoid incorporating explicit reference to school community. Educational philosophers such as John Dewey and Horrace Mann saw school practices as emerging from the democratic nature of American communities; schools were likewise considered necessary to develop the enlightened and rational citizenry that communities in a democracy depended upon. “The realization of a form of social life in which interests are mutually interpenetrating, and where progress, or readjustment, is an important consideration,” Dewey (1916) wrote, “makes a democratic community more interested than other communities have cause to be in deliberate and systematic education” (p. 87).

Early American sociological examination of schooling explored issues related to the inherent tension between community influence and the effective organization of educational practice. Willard Waller (1937), for example, described how communities often imposed antiquated sets of moral standards constraining both the personal and institutional behaviors of school personnel. Pitrim Sorokin (1927) identified limitations and contradictions inherent in democratic demands for schooling to facilitate increased social mobility. Sociological research on education prior to World War II, however, generally assumed that communities influenced school practices primarily through formal democratic processes or through the informal pressures of public opinion and participatory involvement.

In the 1950s and 1960s, functionalist accounts of schooling emerged that served to sever sociological appreciation of the relationship between schools and communities. Functionalist interpretations of education argued that school practices mirrored the needs of a *larger* society. In sociology, this perspective had roots in Emile Durkheim’s classic interpretation of how school organization changed to reflect existing and emerging economic conditions (see e.g., Durkheim 1977). Social scientists from a variety of political perspectives came to see American schools as having a generally uniform character that was divorced from conditions in local communities and responded instead to the needs of a larger social system, economic structure, or—given certain political preconceptions—capitalist ruling class (see e.g., Parsons 1959, Blau & Duncan 1967, Carnoy & Levin 1985, Bowles & Gintis 1976). If schools were shaped by macrolevel functional imperatives, local communities were implicitly assumed to be inconsequential—not only in continental settings such as France, with a strongly centralized education system, but also in the United States.

The nadir of social scientific appreciation for the relationship between schools and community occurred in the 1970s. Functional accounts of schooling largely convinced many researchers that schools did not significantly vary as a result of community setting; institutionalists further argued that schools had their own organizational culture and were “encapsulated” by, or only “loosely coupled” to,

other organizations in their environment (Meyer & Rowan 1977, Sarason 1971, Weick 1976). In addition, a number of prominent social scientists began to assert that even if variation in school practices existed, this variation had few if any significant effects on student outcomes. Many researchers had interpreted the Coleman Report as evidence for the absence of traditional school effects, and the influential study of Jencks et al (1972) further contributed to a profound level of academic skepticism and disinterest in the further exploration of systematic community-based school variation (see Karabel & Halsey 1977: pp. 19–26).<sup>2</sup> By the end of the 1970s, it is not much of an exaggeration to summarize the conventional wisdom within sociology as a belief that public school variation within the United States was small, insignificant, and largely inconsequential.<sup>3</sup>

## SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES: Recent Reformulations

While I have just described how research in the 1960s and 1970s contributed to the demise of an appreciation for the relationship between schools and communities, ironically some of these same scholars (particularly James Coleman and John Meyer) had begun to sow the intellectual seeds of a reconceptualization of the nature of school community. Two sociological theoretical developments—the elaboration of the concept of social capital and the neoinstitutional articulation and definition of organizational environment—allowed for a redefinition of what was meant by a school’s community.

Coleman’s work on social capital identified both a clearer focus on the structural organization of individual relationships within communities and a mechanism whereby communities could therefore affect educational processes. While Coleman had long been interested in how peer relationships affected student orientations and academic performance (Coleman 1960, Coleman et al 1966), his development of the concept of social capital extended his focus on student network ties to incorporate intergenerational linkages amongst youth and adults in a larger community. Specifically, Coleman (1988) argued that when greater interpersonal and intergenerational closure exists amongst individuals within schools and the surrounding community, student behavior and actions were more aligned with socially productive conventional adult norms. When schools were in communities that were socially disintegrated in terms of the amount of adult contact with other adults or their children, the monitoring and constraining of youth misbehavior was more difficult. When intergenerational closure in school communities was weak, youth

<sup>2</sup>Robert Hauser’s (1970) astute and influential methodological critique of some common errors in contextual school research also possibly discouraged work in this area.

<sup>3</sup>There were, of course, notable exceptions to this. James Coleman, for example, never failed to appreciate the importance of recognizing school-level differences; Charles Bidwell has long argued for the importance of comparative research on schools as organizations (see e.g., Bidwell 1965 and 1999). On the other hand, others have remained largely skeptical of significant school effects (see e.g., Jencks and Mayer 1990, Hanushek 1989).

had opportunities to develop their own autonomous peer cultures with distinctive sets of values and norms often divorced from or antagonistic to conventional adult behavior.<sup>4</sup>

During roughly the same time period, neoinstitutionalists began arguing that schools were located in specific organizational environments or fields. John Meyer's early work on education served as a catalyst for the development of many aspects of this approach (Meyer & Rowan 1977). Coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures were argued to exist within organizational environments, which worked to produce a common but distinct set of organizational forms (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). Neoinstitutionalists focus particular attention on the role of state authority in structuring organizational practices. While initial neoinstitutional research on education often adopted existing social scientific assumptions about the lack of variation in public schools within the United States (see e.g., Scott & Meyer 1988), a framework had been generated that could serve to structure renewed investigation of school community in terms of *organizational field*. Neoinstitutionalists who examined schools began to focus not just on the earlier examined demographic and cultural characteristics of local communities, but on legal climates, regulatory contexts, and political institutions as well as other relevant organizations (see e.g., Wirt & Kirst 1997, Meyer et al 1988, Meyer et al 1987, Chubb & Moe 1990). From this perspective, a school community was defined not simply by the residents who lived in areas surrounding a school, but rather by a school's organizational environment (Barr et al 1983, Bidwell & Kasarda 1985, Gamoran & Dreeben 1986). If one adopted assumptions of little meaningful school variation, public schools across the United States could be argued to share a common organizational field; if one rejected assumptions of the absence of school variation, the effects of context-specific institutional features of the organizational environment could be examined.

While theoretical developments around neoinstitutional theory and the concept of social capital created an intellectual justification for a redefinition of school community, society itself had changed over the past century in ways that provided a material basis for this redefinition. Specifically, technology, individual mobility, increased female labor market participation, and the spatial organization of metropolitan areas had in many ways undermined traditional forms of neighborhood organization. Putnam (1995), for example, has argued that over the past few decades not only has voter participation in elections and membership in unions declined, but so too has citizen participation in many local voluntary organizations (such as church-related groups, parent-teacher associations, civic organizations, and fraternal organizations). While some of the specific declines that Putnam mentions have been vigorously debated (see e.g., Chaves 1990, Hout & Greeley 1990),

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<sup>4</sup>Recent ecological research on schools has focused on how school-community relationships are defined primarily by interconnectedness at this interpersonal level (Epstein 1995; Steinberg, Brown and Dornbusch 1996).

it is likely that many traditional forms of civic community and involvement are in decline. It is also likely, however, that they are simultaneously being replaced by new forms of community organization, activity, and influence (Skocpol 1997). In particular, new communities have organized around shared identities and have often pressed their demands in legal and other (political and professional) *institutional* settings (Schudson 1998). In many areas of educational practice, courts—not parent-teacher associations or local school boards—have become the primary mechanism whereby communities can affect school organization. In other areas of educational practice, educational communities are organized around professional schools, teacher and administrator professional associations, and state departments of education. In short, defining school communities in ecological terms at the neighborhood-level misses the extent to which school practices are shaped by larger sets of institutional forces. Today more than ever, a school's relevant community is not just a neighborhood demographic environment, but equally an institutional environment. Changes in the actual character of community involvement and participation partially underlay this social scientific redefinition of school community.

Renewed interest and redefinition of school community that encompasses a school's institutional environment is apparent in many areas of research on education. To give a sense of the character of these changes, I describe developments in a handful of key research areas involving the sociology of education. While in some areas an appreciation for the institutional significance of the organizational environment around schools is fully developed, in other areas research incorporating these new definitions of community are still somewhat embryonic and fragmentary. Before illustrating the redefined sociological understanding of what is meant by school community through a very broad and general review of recent research on racial segregation, resource inequality, curriculum variation, school-to-work transitions, and school discipline, I first digress to discuss the contributions and limitations of renewed research on neighborhood effects as it relates specifically to an appreciation of the relationship between schools and communities.

## NEIGHBORHOOD EFFECTS

Since the turn of the twentieth century, social scientists and reformers such as W.E.B. DuBois used social surveys to document how neighborhood communities varied in terms of race, poverty, and socioeconomic characteristics such as educational attainment. Scholars at the University of Chicago, however, developed a distinct focus on how isolation of ethnic neighborhoods produced less social integration and increased rates of social disorder, delinquency, and crime (Bulmer 1991, Bulmer et al 1991, Bulmer 1984).

Much of the contemporary research on neighborhood effects has applied this focus, relying on demographic and social integration to explore neighborhood influences that produce variation in educational outcomes (for a review of this research, see Gephart 1997). For example, Brooks-Gunn et al (1993) used the Panel Study of Income Dynamics to demonstrate an association between the

likelihood of dropping out of school and income levels, occupational category, and marital status of neighborhood residents. Clark (1992) and Crane (1991) identified similar relationships using Census data, debating, however, whether there were nonlinearities in the effects of concentrated neighborhood poverty. Educational attainment in terms of years of schooling has also been explained by reference to its association with demographic factors present in zip-code or census tract–defined neighborhoods (Ensminger et al 1996, Duncan 1994, Datcher 1982). It is quite remarkable, however, that these studies usually model neighborhood effects on individual educational outcomes without incorporating consideration of variation in the structure of schooling across neighborhoods: i.e., ignoring the most important probable source of institutional variation affecting educational achievement within neighborhoods. Models of neighborhood effects on educational outcomes that fail to incorporate measures of school characteristics thus implicitly assume that either schools vary solely as a function of demographic and organizational characteristics of neighborhood settings (usually defined by census tracts) or that variation in schooling is inconsequential and insignificant. If schools, however, vary as a result of (unmeasured) political and institutional factors, and variation in the structure of schooling affects student achievement, then much of the research on how neighborhoods affect educational outcomes has been characterized by significant omitted-variable bias.

While research on neighborhood effects as a whole has failed to consider adequately the role of schooling, researchers applying a similar emphasis on the demographic characteristics of social environments have for several decades explored the effects of school composition on individual-level attainment and attitudes (see Jencks & Mayer 1990 for a skeptical and pessimistic evaluation of school compositional effects identified in this research tradition). Researchers, for example, have identified the effects, net of individual family background, of attending schools with socially disadvantaged students on test scores (Bryk & Raudenbush 1992) and the increased risk of poverty (Fischer et al 1996). Buchmann & Dalton (1999), however, have recently argued that the effects of peer influences vary across countries as a result of institutional context. Buchmann & Dalton demonstrate that a school's institutional context—in terms of educational stratification—structures the parameters whereby peers can have either more or less influence on educational aspirations. In addition, the social and cultural competencies of neighborhood parents structure variation in both how parents interact with schools and how educational institutions respond to community pressures (e.g., Wells & Crain 1997, Lareau 1987).

Criminological investigations of school effects—perhaps due to the field's intellectual debts to the Chicago School of Sociology—have also recognized and incorporated school community setting in the analysis of the determinants of delinquency and crime. Variation in peer climates, which are partially the result of a school's neighborhood setting, affect youth behavior, as does the disruption of social capital produced by family migration (Hagan et al 1996). School settings that fail to produce meaningful adolescent attachment to conventional activities are characterized by higher rates of delinquency (Sampson & Laub 1993). Students

that go to schools in settings of more concentrated poverty have higher rates of adolescent delinquency (Rutter et al 1979) and during later points in their life course suffer higher rates of adult incarceration (Arum & Beattie 1999).

Prominent researchers at the University of Chicago have reinvigorated this research tradition through their work on social capital (Coleman 1988), social control (Sampson & Laub 1993), and the urban underclass (Wilson 1987). Coleman, Wilson, and Sampson have all appreciated the role of community forces in shaping educational processes and the critical role of schooling in determining life course outcomes. Coleman's work on social capital and educational attainment, for example, elaborated on the theme of social integration and closure. Coleman theorized that different degrees of closure in social networks of private compared to public school communities created variation in student educational achievement (e.g., Coleman & Hoffer 1987). William Julius Wilson (1987) also argued that youth from racially segregated neighborhoods suffered the effects of concentrated poverty: In particular they developed nonconventional peer cultures due to insufficient numbers of middle-class role models and limited interpersonal and institutional connections to the larger community. In recent work, Wilson (1996) has emphasized the critical role of schools in the design of effective policy interventions to address the problems of concentrated poverty. In addition, Robert Sampson has worked to elaborate social control theories within criminology (e.g., Sampson & Morenoff 1997, Sampson & Laub 1993, Sampson & Groves 1989). Sampson extended Hirschi's (1969) concept of social control by emphasizing social capital and the critical role of schools in the life course; his emphasis on the role of the education system in social control is consistent with the earlier work of Durkheim (1925) and Park & Burgess (1921).

While Coleman, Sampson, and Wilson's research continues the Chicago tradition of conceptualizing community largely in terms of demographic composition and social organization (see e.g., Park 1916, Shaw & McKay 1942), the work provides a new emphasis on the identification of the importance of specific social relationships and network ties. Rather than assuming that neighborhood-level social organization affects all residents of a community through a diffuse process relying on broad models of social contagion, the research tradition suggests instead that an individual's community is actually both created and defined by an individual's specific social relationships. It is also worth emphasizing that these researchers are theorizing and modeling effects of school variation not simply on small changes in test scores, but more often through exploring how schooling affects more dramatic life course outcomes (such as the likelihood of dropping out of high school, unemployment, poverty, and criminality).

Recent research on schools located in immigrant communities has particularly benefited from attention to the role of social capital and intergenerational closure in the educational process (see e.g., Zhou & Bankston 1998, Portes & Rumbaut 1996). Schools located in neighborhoods with high concentrations of middle-class ethnic immigrants are exceptional, however, in the extent to which families in these neighborhoods still form coherent locally constituted demographic communities



and orient social activities toward fellow residents of the ethnic enclaves where they reside.

## RACIAL SEGREGATION

The limitations inherent in assuming that school communities are defined solely by local neighborhood demographic and social organizations are apparent in research on school segregation. Sociologists have long recognized: that schools were situated in local neighborhoods that in the United States were often characterized by racial, ethnic, and class segregation, and that the concentration of minorities in certain public schools reduced educational achievement in those settings (Coleman et al 1966, Rivkin 1994, Bankston & Caldas 1996). Educational research, however, has demonstrated that political factors also independently affect racial school enrollment patterns (e.g., Werum 1999, James 1988) and that it is thus possible to generate variation in educational outcomes by creating distinct school communities not solely based on residential neighborhood enrollment (Orfield & Eaton 1996). Courts have mandated desegregation plans in many US school districts over the last four decades. This court intervention highlights how the relevant school community currently is defined as much by institutional as neighborhood demographic context. Research on school segregation demonstrates that student composition, school neighborhood setting, and court interventions interact to affect the structure of schooling and educational achievement. Wells & Crain (1997) have recently published a descriptive case study of how these multiple factors affect the structure of schooling in the St. Louis public schools.

While some researchers have remained skeptical of the effects of racial school segregation (see e.g., Jencks & Mayer 1990, Hanushek 1997), social scientists have repeatedly demonstrated the effects of racial segregation on individual-level outcomes. Research on summer setback, for example, has extended Heyns' (1978) earlier work by demonstrating that youth have distinct patterns of in-school and out-of-school learning associated with school and neighborhood composition (Entwisle & Alexander 1994, 1992). African-American students in integrated schools show larger than expected gains in mathematics (Entwisle & Alexander 1992, Prager et al 1986, Wortman & Bryant 1985). Entwisle & Alexander (1994), however, have also demonstrated a more complex pattern of segregation on elementary reading test scores. Since reading test scores are more sensitive to informal nonschool learning of language, summer family and neighborhood context account for a larger role in annual cognitive gains in that area. Researchers have also demonstrated that integrated schools (net of individual background) lead African-American students to have greater likelihood of college attendance and higher occupational prestige (Kaufman & Rosenbaum 1992, Rosenbaum 1991, Braddock 1980).

School composition also has been argued to affect long-term patterns of individual racial interactions. Wells & Crain (1994), for example, have used perpetuation

theory to account for the long-term effects of racial segregation on individual-level attitudes and behavior. Following McPartland & Braddock (1981), Wells & Crain argue that individuals who have experienced desegregated settings earlier in life are likely to have different life course trajectories and different institutional experiences as adults. African-Americans who have attended integrated high school settings are more likely to attend predominately white colleges (Dawkins 1983, Braddock 1980), to have social networks as adults that incorporate whites, and to work in settings with greater numbers of whites (Trent 1991, Crain & Strauss 1985).

While research on school desegregation effects is particularly sensitive to problems of selection bias—since both African-Americans and whites face selective pressures affecting their presence in desegregated neighborhoods and schools—it is worth noting that quasi-experimental studies have tended to yield similar sets of findings. For example, researchers have examined outcomes associated with the Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program and Project Concern. The Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program was established by court order in 1976 and led the Chicago Housing Authority to assign suburban integrated housing on the basis of availability, rather than preference (Kaufman & Rosenbaum 1992, Rosenbaum 1991). Project Concern assigned randomly selected students in Hartford to attend racially integrated schools (Crain & Strauss 1985). Research based on both of these quasi-experimental programs identifies the positive effects of integrated settings on minority educational and occupational outcomes.

## RESOURCE INEQUALITY

While research on resource inequality in the sociology of education has been a prominent feature of the field since Coleman et al's (1966) report on the role of racial segregation in structuring access to educational opportunities, research over the last decade has changed many of the ways social scientists understand these issues. Social scientists have begun to explore systematically the institutional causes for variation in educational resource allocation. In addition, a general consensus has recently emerged on the relationship between educational resource investment and student achievement.

The Coleman Report's exploration of resource inequality was quite limited and focused only on determinants such as region, racial segregation, and rural school setting. Recent research has worked to identify much more concretely the institutional and political factors affecting educational resource allocations. Research has explored how demographic factors, such as the age structure of the population, affect per-student allocations. Chew (1992) identified both demographic and ideological factors that influence voters' support for public education in California. Poterba's (1997) examination of time series data on US state support for K-12 public education also found that increases in the fraction of the population that was elderly led to decreased school funding, particularly when students were

of a different racial background than that of elderly voters. In addition, research on the allocation of educational resources has suggested that voter decisions are often made on the basis of fiscal illusions, with voters largely unaware of actual current levels of resources available per student (Romer & Rosenthal 1984). Poterba (1997) also demonstrated how state educational funding fails to closely reflect changes in school enrollment levels, with large cohorts negatively affected by corresponding reductions in per-student expenditures. In my own research, I found quite similar trends, with public school per-student expenditures being both higher and more nearly equal to private schools when private school enrollments significantly reduced the number of public school students (Arum 1996).

Research on educational funding has also demonstrated how state constitutional requirements and court actions have led to variation in local school funding. Differences in state constitutional statutes have led state courts to allow different degrees of disparities in local school funding. Courts in some states have allowed only very limited inequities in local funding of public schools; when state funding predominates, schools receive more equitable intrastate funding (Evans et al 1997, Murray et al 1998). Other institutional factors affect educational resources at the classroom level. Increased demands for greater bureaucracy and increased resource-intensive special education programs in urban public schools, for example, are internal organizational factors affecting resource-per-student levels in regular classrooms (Boozer & Rouse 1995). The unionization of teachers also increases the cost of instruction. Conservative economists have argued that teacher unionization has led to lower productivity (Hoxby 1996) and that schools should adopt anti-union employment policies, such as the imposition of two-tiered employment contracts, fewer tenure guarantees, and the use of computers to replace school personnel (Hanushek et al 1994).

In the past decade, social scientists have also come to appreciate the role of resource investment in affecting educational outcomes. Because of the political significance of this research area, debate on the topic continues. Erik Hanushek in 1996, for example, testified as an expert witness in favor of ending court-ordered remediation of St. Louis public school segregation; he insisted that differences in classroom size of 40 students to one teacher compared to 15 students to one teacher were inconsequential and not related to school performance (Hanushek 1997). While some politically conservative researchers thus still attempt to assert that public school inefficiencies are so great that increases in educational inputs are not significantly related to educational attainment (see also Hanushek 1989, Hanushek et al. 1994), a variety of sophisticated methodological studies have demonstrated a clear set of positive associations. Card & Krueger (1992), for example, examined individuals in post-World War II US census reports who had left their original home state. Individuals from states with fewer students per teacher had increased years of educational attainment and higher lifetime annual earnings. Randomized experiments in Tennessee demonstrated increased gains on elementary school cognitive tests when students are enrolled in smaller classes (Finn & Achilles 1990). Hedges et al (1994) have also countered Hanushek's assertions

with the use of meta-analysis. In secondary school settings, I have shown that state-level investment in resources per vocational student leads to dramatically different student outcomes (Arum 1998). In spite of the overwhelming evidence that educational resources affect school performance and student outcomes, politically motivated challenges will likely continue.

## CURRICULUM VARIATION

Recent research within the sociology of education has also expanded our understanding of the structure of curriculum variation between schools. While research prior to the past decade often applied the concept of academic tracking to nationally representative data sets without consideration of local variation, researchers have begun to specify how and why the organization of curricular tracks varies between schools. Critical in this developing research was Gamoran's (1992) work, which demonstrated that schools actually organized tracking systems in a variety of ways. Gamoran argued that the effects of tracking varied as a function of the structural dimensions of the tracking system, including selectivity, electivity, inclusiveness, and scope. In related work, I have demonstrated that the effects of vocational curriculum are dependent on resource investment: in states that invest high levels of resources per vocational student, students have increased likelihood of graduation relative to other nonvocational students in similar schools: in states that invest low levels of resources per student, the programs have harmful effects, decreasing the likelihood of graduation (Arum 1998).

Researchers have also attempted to specify how variation in the organizational environment produces variation in the structure of curriculum and curricular enrollments (Loveless 1999). Political, economic, and institutional factors have been identified in an effort to account for this variation. The expansion of community colleges and their vocational curricular emphasis, for example, have been explored from this perspective. While Brint & Karabel (1989) argued that developments in community colleges were largely the product of the organizational self-interest of community college administrators, more recent work has identified the role of local politically elected officials in this process (Dougherty 1994).

Dougherty's recognition of the role of local politics in shaping schools and their curricular offerings supports many social historical accounts of the development of educational policies and practices. While Dougherty emphasizes the role of local elected officials, others have provided evidence of the critical role of local unions, middle-class women's organizations, and ethnic associations (Kliebard 1999, Peterson 1985, Reese 1986; for an excellent review of how political factors structure urban school variation, see also Rury & Mirel 1997). Historical analyses have also identified patterns of how enrollment patterns reflect local labor market conditions (Walters & James 1992, Walters et al 1990) and local political mobilization (Werum 1999).

Interestingly, researchers analyzing contemporary associations between occupational curricular content and local labor market structure have argued that vocational programs have not been closely linked with local labor market needs. The responsiveness of vocational programs to economic and institutional forces was explored by Starr (1983), who examined 1979 and 1980 state vocational plans to determine the degree to which labor market needs affected program design. Starr noted that in the majority of states there was no clear relationships among program and enrollment goals, funding decisions, and employment needs, with only eight states mentioning skilled labor shortages as a factor influencing program design. Franchak (1983) interviewed 105 randomly chosen secondary and postsecondary occupational administrators to determine what factors influenced administrative decisions to add, terminate, or modify course offerings: institutional factors by far dominated economic factors in determining program decisions.

Research on school curricular reform efforts also illustrates the extent to which the relevant school community encompasses political and institutional aspects, rather than simply neighborhood demographic characteristics. Mickelson (1999) recently identified how access to technology-enriched curriculum can be the outcome of both corporate business sponsorship and local political contestation. Wilson & Rossman (1993) have examined how various layers of educational bureaucracy can combine to shape state curriculum reforms. Wilson & Rossman argue that the organizational environment affecting school curriculum includes not only school site personnel, but district administrators and state department of education staff.

## SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITIONS

Recent research on school-to-work transitions and status attainment processes has also suggested ways in which institutional and interpersonal aspects of school communities are of critical importance. A school's institutional relationships can shape curricular offerings (as identified above) as well as structure the process whereby students find initial employment. While certain forms of vocational curriculum can facilitate positive school-to-work transitions particularly for women (see Arum & Hout 1997, Arum & Shavit 1995), the specific character of vocational programs is often linked to a school's political and institutional relationships. In addition, the effects of vocational programs are often dependent on actual student attainment of desirable occupations for which they have been trained (Hotchkiss 1993, Bishop 1989). Difficulties in student transitions to the labor market are thus often related to the institutional environment surrounding schools (Kerckhoff 1995).

Sociologists have explicated how the process of finding a job can be structured by both interpersonal and institutional relationships. Both these types of relationships are related to how schools are embedded in specific demographically defined neighborhoods and institutional environments. Employers often rely on personal or institutional ties to reduce uncertainty in hiring new employees.

Employers will develop and utilize these types of ties more frequently when such relationships provide solutions to specific problems faced by firms. Firms will seek to lower transaction costs (Williamson 1975) and reduce risks of uncertainty (March & Olson 1980) when making hiring decisions. Network relationships, such as those implicit in most school-assisted job placement, "are particularly apt for circumstances in which there is a need for efficient reliable information" (Powell 1990:304). Research on job findings has demonstrated that employers use formal and informal network relationships in this manner. Granovetter (1974), for example, has stressed the role of informal, weak interpersonal ties; researchers such as Kirschenman & Neckerman (1991) have demonstrated the racial dimensions of these processes and how a school's reputation can affect hiring decisions. Italian research on school-to-work transitions also has focused on how social networks affect status attainment outcomes. Barbieri (1997), for example, has identified the importance of strong network ties to individuals with higher social standing as an important resource facilitating individual attainment of more desirable occupations. Barbieri's research demonstrates that in Italy, community-based interpersonal contacts are critical for individuals attempting to move into jobs with higher occupational status.

The role of institutional school-business relationships has also been explored. Researchers in the United States have identified the significance of school-business institutional ties in promoting new models of vocational education (Olson 1997, Bailey 1995). Federal, state, and local forces have encouraged many US public schools to create partnerships with local businesses (Frazier 1991). These partnerships have often taken the form of school academies with specific vocational focuses organized within a larger school setting. Maxwell & Rubin (1998) and Stern et al (1992) have described in detail how these programs are organized and can affect student outcomes. Poczik (1995) has examined how these partnerships have encouraged vocational student placement in the workplace.

In other countries, the significance of school-business ties has long been apparent. In Germany and Japan, for example, researchers have identified how school-assisted job placement can facilitate school-to-work transitions (Hamilton & Hurrelmann 1994, Rosenbaum & Kariya 1989). Vocational education is more effective in Germany than in the United States, not simply owing to higher levels of resource investment there, but because of the close relationship between schools and industry (Hamilton & Hurrelmann 1994, Rosenbaum et al 1990). School-business institutional ties are an integral part of the German apprenticeship system (Vickers 1995). In a comparative cross-national project, Mueller & Shavit (1997) recently also focused attention on how institutional characteristics of particular countries can affect school-to-work transitions. Mueller & Shavit demonstrate that national school systems with greater stratification, standardization, postsecondary opportunities and vocational specificity have more effective vocational programs.

In the United States, several recent studies have focused on how high school-assisted job placement can affect characteristics of first job. Rosenbaum & Binder (1997), for example, found that employers use high school linkages to screen applicants who otherwise are likely to present limited reliable information; they

also found that employers have an interest in the information that school personnel possess. Approximately one third of the 51 employers Rosenbaum & Binder (1997) interviewed in the Chicago area had developed long-term close relationships with schools that utilized school-assisted job placement. In related work, I have found that employers are much more likely to utilize school-assisted job placement for filling clerical positions with female job candidates and that these placements can improve women's early labor market outcomes (Arum & Way 1998).

## SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

The importance of considering both demographic and institutional characteristics of school environments can also be clearly demonstrated when one approaches the issue of variation in school disciplinary climates. School disciplinary climates emerge out of a complex interaction between the demographic characteristics of students and teachers and the social organization of school interpersonal communities as well as the institutional environment around schools (for a vivid description of the climate in urban public schools, see Devine 1996). In recent decades, courts and professional schools in particular have influenced school practices affecting the school's ability to control student disorder. Gerald Grant's (1988) history of an urban high school provides an exceptionally lucid account of how institutional factors can produce changing disciplinary practices and peer climates at the school-level.

Researchers, for example, have argued that over the past thirty years public schools in general have systematically weakened their disciplinary measures, lessening the constraints on acceptable student behavior (Toby 1995, Phillips 1993). Symbolic of this change at a national level was the 1975 Supreme Court *Goss v. Lopez* decision extending the right of *due process* to public school students. Public school administrators no longer could act on their own discretion and authority to expel unruly and misbehaving adolescents; students instead were given the right to both formal hearings and legal representation (Wise 1979). Although there has been a national decline in the severity of public school disciplinary practices, states have varied to the extent that they have constrained the latitude of local school authorities (Pressman 1990, Paquet 1982). While certain states severely restrict the prerogative of school personnel to punish students, other states have maintained strict disciplinary practices by giving school administrators broad powers through the school's assumption of *loco parentis* authority.

In exploring contemporary variation in school disciplinary practices, researchers have made descriptive use of US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights data to identify a pattern of prevalent and racially discriminatory school disciplinary practices (Hyman 1990, Hyman & Wise 1979). Analysis of OCR data has been supplemented by the use of independent school-level surveys. Rose (1988, 1984) documented the declining but continued use of corporal punishment in US schools in the 1980s by surveying school administrators. In the 1980s, schools located in the South reported the greatest use of the practice, but principals in all

regions of the country with the exception of New England reported its use. In 1988, 58.1% of principals reported the use of corporal punishment down from 74.1% in 1984.

DiPrete et al (1981) provide the most systematic and comprehensive analysis of school disciplinary practices in their analysis of High School and Beyond student and school personnel survey responses. DiPrete et al (1981) measured a school's disciplinary climate in two ways. They calculated a ratio of sophomores who were disciplined to sophomores who misbehaved; and they created a measure of whether five specific rules of conduct were enforced (requirement of hall passes, requirement of dress codes, prohibition of vandalism, prohibition of smoking, and maintenance of a closed campus at lunchtime). Both these measures varied significantly across regions. Schools in western states punish relatively few students compared to the number who misbehave and have the weakest reports of rule enforcement; schools located in central states have the highest level of rule enforcement.

Sociologists recently have begun to focus increased attention on how school practices such as school discipline are influenced not just by demographic factors, but by legal pressures around schools. Critical work in this area emerged out of a Stanford-based conference that brought together sociologists, such as John Meyer, Ann Swidler, and Aaron Benavot, with educational and legal researchers, including Robert Kagan, David Kirp, David Tyack, and Thomas James (see Kirp & Jensen 1986). Educational research from a law and society perspective highlighted the extent to which litigation and judicial action had hyperregulated public school operations (Tyack et al 1987, Kirp 1986, Kagan 1986). Legal researchers (Rebell & Hughes 1996, Bardach & Kagan 1982, Lieberman 1981) have argued that "adversarial legalism" has created organizational inefficiencies in both schools and society. After World War II, educational litigation increased dramatically (Zirkel 1997), giving state-level and Federal District-level judiciaries increasing opportunities to interpret laws regulating public school operations differently (Pressman 1990). From a demographic perspective, Grasmick et al (1992) have shown that individuals with higher levels of education, income, and occupational prestige are less likely to support the use of corporal punishment in schools.

Variation in school disciplinary policies has also been argued to have had significant effects on student achievement. For more than three decades, Coleman and his colleagues (e.g., Coleman & Hoffer 1987, Coleman et al 1966, Coleman 1960) have demonstrated that adolescent peer climates vary by school and are important determinants of educational achievement. School disciplinary policies provide the parameters in which student peer climates emerge. More recently, Coleman & Hoffer (1987) argued that private schools, partially because they are able more easily to expel unruly students, have less disruptive peer climates and higher educational achievement than public schools. DiPrete et al (1981) found that rates of misbehavior during the senior year are lower in schools that have higher rates of disciplining sophomore students. Misbehaving students also have lower levels of



educational achievement as measured by change in grades and test scores (Myers et al 1987). Critics of traditional disciplinary measures, however, have countered that strict, authoritarian school regimes are counterproductive in that such settings stifle individual creativity, produce student resistance, and are therefore detrimental to educational achievement (e.g., Noguera 1992, Metz 1978). My own recent work has attempted to examine this issue in the context of both demographic and institutional factors.

## CONCLUSION

In reviewing literature on such a broad topic as schools and communities, I have been forced to rely on illustrative examples from a variety of topics in the sociology of education to suggest the emergence of a shift in how researchers are defining school community. In recent years, school settings have reemerged as a renewed focus of analysis with researchers exploring demographic factors related to neighborhood setting and also exploring institutional aspects of a school's organizational environment. Communities have re-emerged as a principal focus of analysis, but sociologists now define these communities in much broader ways than in the past. Sociologists have come to recognize that although local neighborhood settings are often (but not always) the location where students reside, schools are also shaped by institutional aspects of organizational environments. School personnel often commute from neighborhoods that are geographically and socially distant from schools where they are employed. Regardless of the geographic neighborhood, teachers and administrators as professionals (Abbott 1988) likely define their communities in terms of common sets of professional—not neighborhood—norms and values. As organizational research reminds us (DiMaggio & Powell 1983), school practices are structured by coercive, normative, and mimetic institutional pressures.

Several theoretical and methodological obstacles exist, however, that threaten the successful realization of extending research in this direction. Theoretically, innovative and policy-relevant research on schools and communities must rely on concepts from more than one intellectual tradition (Lagemann 1999). Research on social organization and demographic aspects of school communities usually rely on the Chicago School of Sociology's ecological definition of neighborhoods. Research on political and institutional influences present in a school's organizational environment rely on concepts developed within political sociology or the sociology of organizations. Lastly, modeling of how variation in schooling affects individual-level student outcomes largely has its roots in research on social stratification and status attainment. There are several difficulties in attempting to bring these separate traditions together, including theoretical debate over the appropriate level of analysis. In the US federal system, the state level—as opposed to the local level—has become increasingly important as institutional variation in laws, regulations, and court opinions are often structured at that level.

Methodologically, researchers have attempted to deal with the problems inherent in multiple levels of analysis by increasingly relying on hierarchical linear modeling (Bryk & Raudenbush 1992). Although these techniques provide some advantages over ordinary least square regression—particularly in the estimation of standard errors—the models are far from a methodological panacea. The central problems in estimating the effects of demographic and institutional environments remain model misspecification and omitted variable bias.

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