

CHAPTER VII

HOME, SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY: A SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR RELEASING THE POTENTIALITIES OF THE CHILD

Parents, teachers, and the community stand in the most critical positions for influencing the destinies of those who will shape the world of tomorrow. Yet, there has been little success in coordinating these three influences in a way that would lessen the sometimes overwhelming discontinuities among them, the effects of which have tended to fragment the experience of some children rather than support their development. Substantial evidence indicates that these discontinuities cannot be ignored if we are to realize the ambitious goals of the comprehensive educational program outlined in the preceding chapters.

An important study of the effects of parental influence on child performance carried out by Brookover (1965) showed that the school has relatively insignificant power to develop positive self-concepts of ability in youngsters unless they see the significant people in their lives, parents in most instances, as supportive in their efforts to learn and to achieve in school. Thus, parents' attitudes towards their children's education are decisively important to their success in school. Therefore schools must assume some responsibility in taking the initiative to draw out the support of the significant individuals in the lives of their students, particularly those who, for whatever reason,

may view the school negatively, either as a hostile environment or one with values different or alien to their own. This does not mean taking on a patronizing attitude, but rather approaching the home environment with respect and dignity and looking for positive elements to build on in establishing a spirit of cooperative reciprocity with the goal of lessening those discontinuities which tend to fragment the experience of the youngster. When discontinuities are extreme, they create conflicts in the way children interact with the environment. These conflicts then appear in the values of the children and can produce dysfunctional self-concepts and diffuse or pathological identities. On the other hand, cultural diversity can function as a powerful stimulus to the release of potential. We are not interested in creating uniformity of idea and custom; we only wish to help the child and the teacher bridge the most difficult gaps, thereby capitalizing on the diversity rather than being overwhelmed by it.

One of the challenges the school will have to meet is relating the dynamics of the educational program to those parents who tend to passively accept any condition their youngsters face. Some parents may have little or no idea of what they should want from an educational system for their children. In such a case, the school has an opportunity to address a critical need and serve as an educational agent for the parents as well.

There may be other parent needs that can be addressed effectively by the educational system within the same theoretical frame work underlying the program provided for the children. For example, if a literacy program

is needed, the Anisa educational system can offer this service to parents within the context of a larger program of parents assisting their own children to read, thereby lessening some of the negative aspects of adult education programs that are pursued in isolation. A parent who learns to read by assisting his own child to read can transcend the problem of being disinterested in content that is written for a seven-year-old because he has a purpose that is broader than learning how to read for himself. Likewise, a child who is learning how to read will respond to instruction more enthusiastically if his parents are involved and enthusiastic about learning how to read at the same time. The unique feature of this arrangement is that the parent involvement is a real experience with obvious practical outcomes rather than a trumped-up, superficial involvement devoid of meaning and designed merely to give parents something to do within the school environment.

Another need that many parents experience is the desire to learn how to negotiate the educational system in a way that gives them some responsibility and power in determining program and policy. By involving the parent in the educational growth of their youngsters, both in the home and as volunteers in the school operation, they can participate from a position of experience with the system, as a member of the team, rather than as an outsider who is apt to feel more like an opponent.

From a social organization point of view, parental involvement in the education of their youngsters has additional benefits. One only has

to speak with a random sampling of today's youth to realize that there is tremendous reaction against the technological world they experience daily. They reject many contemporary priorities, reflected on local, national, and even international levels, and particularly those which are directed towards a material end. Since members of the older generation are identified with these priorities, they also tend to be rejected. In the wake of that rejection follows a weakening of parental influence and a consolidation of peer-group identity which often reflects non-constructive attitudes and values.

In his Memorandum on Youth, presented as part of The Report of The Commission on The Year 2000, Erikson "sketched the danger felt to exist in the technological orientation:"

. . . more than any young generation before and with less reliance on a meaningful choice of world images, the youth of today is forced to ask what is universally relevant in human life in this technological age at this juncture in history (1967, p. 860).

He also points out that in the wake of technological expansion, desacralization has taken place and to fill that void an "extraordinary hedonism--an attitude that all experience is permissible and even desirable" has developed. In spite of this, he finds "more of a search for re-sacralization in the younger than in the older generation (Ibid., p. 862). In the same report, Kahn & Wiener (1967, p. 707) describe the current trend we are in as "increasingly sensate" or hedonistic. The following descriptors characterize the trend:

. . . worldly, naturalistic, realistic, visual, illusionistic, everyday, amusing, interesting, erotic, satirical, novel, eclectic, syncretic, fashionable, technically superb, impressionistic, materialistic, commercial, and professional.

They predict our moving into the Late Sensate trend, described as follows:

. . .underworldly, expressing protest or revolt, over-ripe, extreme, sensation seeking, titillating, depraved, faddish, violently novel, exhibitionistic, debased, vulgar, ugly, debunking, nihilistic, pornographic, sarcastic, or sadistic (Ibid., p. 707).

Who will speculate on the nature of any trend to follow the Late Sensate period? Whatever we face, the educational system of the future must speak to the unfulfilled needs of which these trends are a symptom.

Because traditional education has been most successful in developing technological competence and less successful in developing better human relationships and a deeper understanding of one's relationship to the unknown, this exclusively materialistic preoccupation, which creates a void and paves the way for the sensate culture Kahn describes, should be a caution to us to redirect our attention to the more human and spiritual needs of the individual. In the past, the family functioned as a nearly self-sufficient unit providing, through its collective efforts, for the economic, religious, educational, protective, recreational and affective needs of its members. Now, through advanced technology and extensive division of labor, agencies outside the family provide for many of those needs and meeting some of the needs are no longer a dominant concern of many families. In an industrialized society where specialization is carried to the point where one easily loses contact with the collective effort within any group, social or professional, there is even greater need for a new means of capturing the attention and sustaining the interest, concern and integrity of family units. The shared goal of

actualizing potentialities through the mutual development of learning competence can provide that central focus because it is congruent with the nurturant functions of human families.

In taking this to be a legitimate focus of concern, it is important that this new educational system provide the opportunity for parents to become knowledgeable about child rearing and the growth and development of their children within the context of this new theoretical frame of reference. There is a substantial body of helpful information about these two areas which can help adults become more effective in their role as parents. With so much written about critical and sensitive periods, it is strange that little has been done about critical periods in "parenting" and the lack of information which would assist parents to meet the needs of their youngsters. The period starting prior to pregnancy and going through the early years to the time of the child's entrance into the formal educational system is a case in point. It is both unnecessary and unfortunate that a mother should have to go through pregnancy and childbirth, and face all the responsibilities of child rearing without being part of a total support system that provides the whole family with a wide variety of aids and assistance.

While the theoretical basis of the model may, at first, seem a challenge to grasp, its coherence and logical consistency facilitate understanding. Furthermore, it does translate into clear principles concerning how one should relate to a child, the attitudes one should have, the assumptions one would make about the latent potentialities of the child and the fact that an effective, meaningful relationship

has to do with "becoming" rather than prescribing limitations and focussing on inadequacies. While the intricacies of the specifications which support the model require careful study over a long period of time if they are to be fully understood, they also translate into objectives and learning experiences to achieve them which are easily grasped. To become knowledgeable about these objectives and to participate in the process of translating them into experiences for youngsters can provide a rich educational experience for the parent as well. Many of these activities can be started when the child is only a few days old and carried through the early years until he is old enough to benefit from a more formal educational setting. We see this not merely as a worthwhile involvement, but rather as a critical undertaking, because this is the optimum period for creating an orientation to life which will have an enduring effect on the realization of the child's potentialities through his life.

We also see the educational system providing a supportive role for youngsters who, along with their parents, necessarily go through periods of stress: divorce, moving, illness, death, or loss of economic support. These stresses may have a devastating effect on youngsters and can be extremely disorienting for a long period of time. When the entire support system works together in managing these periods of stress, the discomfort can be lessened and possible deleterious consequences avoided. For many families, a history of misfortune, poverty and stress has led to despair and pessimism. If the school

takes on similar attitudes of despair and resignation toward seemingly impossible conditions, it can hardly provide for the learning needs of those children in any effective way. The school must therefore shoulder, in collaboration with other institutions of the community, a major responsibility in working to alleviate those conditions, which if not addressed simply render impotent most of the efforts made in school.

To manage effectively this responsibility, the Anisa staffing arrangement calls for a home-school-community liaison worker whose major responsibility is to bridge gaps, among the three major influences emphasizing positive forces that will collectively comprise a viable support system that facilitates the actualization of the endless potentialities that are latent within each child. While the role of the liaison worker has not been fully defined at this point, there are a number of functions of central concern. Collaborating with the health specialist in making an assessment of the health needs of the children, including nutrition, and assisting the parents to become knowledgeable about nutritional planning for their family ranks high on the list. It will also be the responsibility of the school liaison worker to facilitate communication between the school and the home so that misunderstandings are avoided and a mutually supportive relationship sustained. Facilitating the organization of parents is still another responsibility of the school liaison worker. This may include the formation of an adult education component that would address the needs identified by parents in terms of their own educational development, particularly as it relates to the educational development of their children.

The liaison worker would also coordinate services such as tutorials, medical care, dental care, and in some cases professional counseling. Since considerable educational instruction will take place in the home prior to the youngsters' exposure to a formal setting, liaison personnel would also work in concert with the teachers to assist parents who are anxious to become more proficient in instructing their youngsters. Concomitant with this effort would be the operation of a toy and materials lending library sponsored by the school and made available to the parents, along with professional assistance in determining the level at which each of these materials should be used and the way in which they would be used. Parents would be encouraged to examine the system's objectives and to make classroom observations and participate actively in the evaluation of their youngsters' performance in terms of those objectives. Still another responsibility of the liaison worker would be to act as one of the school's representatives to the community to keep them informed and to elicit the cooperation of the community in providing its resources--recreational, library, health, and welfare--when needed. Of particular importance is use of the community as a general educational resource, including the employment of non-credentialed artists, businessmen, skilled workers, and professional people as part-time paid or volunteer teachers.

In many cases the progress of the child in school is directly influenced by his relations with other parts of the community in which he lives. Financial and material resources, health and welfare services, recreational

facilities, and law enforcement services must be systematically and equitably mobilized to eradicate social and environmental conditions which mitigate against the release of potential. Problems arising from social mobility, migration, immigration, delinquency and crime, social disorganization, poor sanitary conditions, inadequate welfare and public services, and institutionalized racism are too big for a school system to manage. The role of the community dealing with these issues and in lending support and stability to the children who are victimized by these stresses in their lives is essential to the success of the school. While an educational system cannot alleviate these conditions by itself, it still must assume a leadership role in providing a comprehensive basis for addressing the human condition and coordinating the efforts of the school, home, and the community in a way that holds the greatest prospects for success.

Ultimately, the community to which the child belongs first must be the world community of humanity. Our survival as a species hangs delicately in the balance. If man is to guide the forces of evolution and place himself in the path of never-ending development, the oncoming generations must have a sense of the oneness of mankind, a worldmindedness, an identification of the planet earth as the homeland and world civilization as the community. Eventually, the resources of the world will have to be managed so that children everywhere have an equal opportunity to become competent learners, enlightened parents and responsible world citizens.