Part I

Framing Themes and Illuminating Theory

Chapter 1

The Social Foundations of Schooling: An Overlooked Dimension for Improvement

Almost daily, some major conference, research report, or pronouncement from an important public official calls for fundamental change in schooling in the United States. A casual inspection of most any issue of *Education Week* may well leave the reader stunned by the intensity and scope of reform activity occurring across this country. Seemingly every aspect of our education system—how it is governed, the basic organization of schools, who teaches, how students are educated, what's being taught, and how we know what students actually are learning—are all subject to intense scrutiny and revision.

We confront today a transformative moment in the history of American education. Standing behind this proliferation of reform activity are fundamental economic and societal changes rivaling those precipitated by the industrial revolution at the turn of the twentieth century. During the last hundred years, U.S. society functioned adequately with only a modest portion of its students being well educated. Now, high-level academic achievement has become a universal aim.[1] Where just two decades ago we would have trumpeted an increase in student basic skills scores in reading and mathematics and a reduction in high school dropouts, reform rhetoric now emphasizes "World Class Standards" of academic attainment for all.[2]

Research has documented significant changes in the economic returns to education during the last two decades.[3] We are evolving rapidly into a two-tier economy where formal schooling becomes a strict gatekeeper between those who gain access to well-paying jobs and those who do not. Moreover, the "new basic skills" required for economic opportunity in the future are likely to be substantially higher

than they are today.[4] Equally compelling arguments are raised as we consider the intellectual demands for effective political participation in an increasingly complex democratic society.[5] That the vitality of a democratic government depends on the social intelligence of its citizenry has been long recognized.[6] The basic form of public education that served adequately on this account in the past, however, is also unlikely to suffice in the future. Similar themes arise internationally, where education is seen as key to economic and political development. It is widely assumed that countries with strong education systems are the ones most likely to prosper in the years ahead.[7]

Such analyses have major implications for our education system. At base here is a call for a fundamental transformation in the mission and operation of U.S. schools. To promote higher levels of academic attainment requires raising the quality of educational experiences for all students, pre-K to 12 and beyond. Within the past decade, we have seen the emergence of efforts at comprehensive school redesign.[8] States and districts are experimenting with various forms of decentralization, chartering, and contracting.[9] Also ongoing are efforts to restructure the basic organization of teachers' and students' work, intensive scrutiny of teachers' knowledge and skills, and efforts to systematically introduce research-based best practices into classrooms.[10] More generally, a broad array of new policy initiatives aimed at advancing student learning has emerged around professional development, accountability, and assessment.[11]

Two broad approaches to school improvement appear in these various reforms. On one side is a focus on structural change as witnessed in efforts to promote governance reform and restructuring of work conditions in schools. This strategy assumes that unless a fundamental reorganization takes place in the institutional arrangements of public schooling, significantly higher levels of academic performance—especially among very disadvantaged students—remains unlikely. These reformers claim that we must reframe the incentives and control mechanisms under which school professionals work in order to encourage the needed innovations and improvements.

Contrasting with this structuralist approach to reform is a more immediate, direct focus on instruction. These critics argue that if we want to promote higher standards of student work, then we must transform teaching practice. This necessitates a concerted effort to improve the knowledge and skills of current teachers, better preparation of their future colleagues, and support for continued development of the teaching profession. While these critics may acknowledge that the current work structures are problematic, they argue that the primary

focus for reform should be on enhancing the human resources of schooling. If this occurs, they believe, the rest will follow.[12]

In our view, both perspectives have merit. Embedded in the current governance arrangements for public education are disincentives and constraints that seriously impede desired improvements.[13] Structuralists therefore are correct in arguing that fundamental institutional change is required. Equally correct, however, are those focused on enhancing teacher competence, who remind us that the classroom—where teachers encounter students around subject matter—is the primary context for instruction. If we wish to substantially improve student learning, we must transform the intellectual dynamics of the classroom.[14]

While acknowledging the significant insights embedded in each of these policy arguments, we have also concluded that both analyses remain incomplete. Within any formal arrangements for schooling, teachers must engage not only particular subjects and ideas about how to teach them, but also students, their parents, and professional colleagues. Important consequences play out in these daily social exchanges.[15] The personal dynamics among teachers, students, and their parents, for example, influence whether students regularly attend school and sustain efforts on the difficult tasks of learning.[16] The history of power relations between a principal and her or his faculty can strongly influence a staff's willingness to undertake some new reform.[17] Similarly, established norms about teacher autonomy can delimit a faculty's capacity to engage in broad-based organizational change.[18]

The Dynamics of Improving Urban Schools

In this book, we argue that the social relationships at work in school communities comprise a fundamental feature of their operations. The nature of these social exchanges, and the local cultural features that shape them, condition a school's capacity to improve. Designing good schools requires us to think about how best to organize the work of adults so that they are more likely to fashion together a coherent environment for the development of children. We have learned, based on our research on school reform in Chicago, that a broad base of trust across a school community lubricates much of a school's day-to-day functioning and is a critical resource as local leaders embark on ambitious improvement plans. Moreover, we maintain that this social trust

is especially important as we focus on disadvantaged urban schools and their task of educating "other people's children."[19]

A Troubled Urban School-Community Context

Profound economic and social changes have swept over our nation's major cities in the last three decades. Many urban neighborhoods have been ravaged by the loss of basic institutions: businesses, churches, banks, health and social service agencies, and community organizations. Little of what we normally envision as communal life exists in some of the poorest neighborhoods.[20] Residential mobility is high, as many families move frequently in search of safe, affordable housing. Taken together, these developments have made some urban communities much less hospitable for raising children. High levels of violence, coupled with transience, tear at the basic social fabric that binds neighborhood residents together. This social fabric, normally considered a resource for child rearing, often is weak.[21]

Moreover, a steady stream of federal, state, and local policies aimed at promoting desegregation had the unintended consequence of distancing schools from the communities in which they are located. For example, almost 30 percent of Chicago elementary school students do not attend their neighborhood school. (At the high school level, the comparable figure is 50 percent.) Similarly, by a judicial consent decree in 1980, a massive redistribution of faculty was executed in the Chicago public schools.[22] On one day, the ties of thousands of teachers to families and local communities were severed. A residue of social distance between school staff and communities has been left in its wake, and is now normative in many places.

As a consequence of these large-scale societal changes, distrust now characterizes many of the social interactions that poor families have with local schools and other public institutions. Teachers often see parents' goals and values as impediments to students' academic accomplishments. Parents in turn believe that teachers are antagonistic toward them and fail to appreciate the actual conditions that shape their children's lives.[23] This lack of trust between teachers and parents—often exacerbated by race and class differences—makes it difficult for these groups to maintain a genuine dialogue about shared concerns.[24] The resultant miscommunications tend to reinforce existing prejudices and undermine constructive efforts by teachers and parents to build relational ties around the interests of children. Instead of working together to support the academic and social development of students, teachers and parents find themselves operating in isolation or, in the worst cases, in opposition to one another.

A Striking Contrast in Urban Catholic Schools

Our interest in the social dynamics of effective urban schools derives from prior research on urban Catholic high schools. Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) found that many parents who placed their children in these schools were neither well educated nor necessarily held a well-articulated conception of the academic experiences that they desired for their children. Parents selected a Catholic school because they trusted that these school professionals would provide their children with a good education. When it came to deciding what students actually did in school, parents relied on the judgment and expertise of the staff, who in turn worked under a moral obligation to act in the best interests of their students. It was understood that teachers' responsibilities included defining the specific content and methods of instruction and, at times, also counseling parents about what they had to do to advance their children's learning.

The support that Catholic schoolteachers received from parents helped them to sustain a high level of commitment to the difficult task of educating disadvantaged youth. Teaching in these schools not only was a technical act, it also was a moral imperative. Faculty felt a strong sense of responsibility for student learning and welfare, and this collective commitment was recognized and valued by parents. The reciprocal character of the trust relations between teachers and parents made demands on teachers to act ethically, and on parents to support and encourage the work of the school. Since parents trusted the intentions of the staff, many potentially contentious issues never developed into conflicts. When misunderstandings did occur, they often were resolved quickly. Overall, the absence of suspicion and distrust in these schools was a key element in their operations and played an important role in their special effectiveness.

Insights from Recent Efforts to Change Urban Schools

Surprisingly, there is relatively little acknowledgment of these relational concerns in either education policy or the more general education research literature.[25] The importance of this social dimension does emerge, however, as we examine more closely some actual efforts to change urban schools. A notable contribution is the work of James Comer. Comer's reform effort, the School Development Project, focuses directly on the social misalignment, described earlier, between urban school professionals and poor parents. Comer organizes his school development work around a community mental health per-

spective, maintaining that unless substantial attention focuses on strengthening the social relationships among school professionals and parents, efforts at instructional improvement are unlikely to succeed.[26]

Similarly, Deborah Meier (1995) devotes a whole chapter of her book, *The Power of Their Ideas*, to reflections on the centrality of social relationships in the highly successful middle school she created in Harlem.[27] By her account, building trust among teachers, school leaders, students, and parents was essential to advancing the academic mission of the school, which was to provide challenging intellectual work for all students. Other supportive accounts from New York City can be found in the efforts of Tony Alvarado and colleagues to build learning communities in District 2.[28] The importance of building respect, trust, and a collegial spirit are specifically cited as central to the positive developments that emerged there.

Further evidence about the significance of the social dimension to school improvement can be found in results from a five-year study of school restructuring efforts conducted by the Center on School Organization and Restructuring at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.[29] Researchers associated with the Center concluded, based on longitudinal studies of restructuring schools, that

> human resources—such as openness to improvement, *trust and respect*, teachers having knowledge and skills, supportive leadership and socialization—are more critical to the development of professional community than structural conditions . . . the need to improve the culture, climate, and *interpersonal relationships in schools* have received too little attention.[30] [emphasis added]

Additional support for these assertions can be found in a detailed study of nine districts' efforts to reform mathematics and science education.[31] Here, too, researchers concluded that norms of trust among local participants played a key role in whether teachers were able to make good use of external support and professional development opportunities to change their practice.

In sum, a growing body of case studies and narrative accounts about school change direct our attention to the social dynamics of schooling, and especially to the engaging but also somewhat elusive idea of social trust as foundational for meaningful school improvement.[32] At last, a fundamental feature of good schools comes into our field of vision. Yet what precisely is social trust and what does it mean in the context of a poor urban school community? What effects are actually associated with it? This book seeks to answer these questions.

Studying Trust in Chicago Elementary Schools

A unique set of circumstances evolved in the Chicago Public Schools in the early 1990s, which made systematic inquiry on this topic possible.

A Context of Decentralized Reform

Beginning in 1988, a major effort was launched in Chicago to transform the operation of its public schools. Then Secretary of Education William Bennett had characterized the city's school system as the "worst in America." Many Chicagoans agreed and in response embraced a radical school system decentralization. Relative to extant practices in other urban districts, the Chicago reform devolved an extraordinary level of resources and authority from the central office out to local school communities. Specifically, the Illinois legislature passed in 1988 the Chicago School Reform Act, which sought to bring about more direct involvement of local school professionals with parents and community members in the improvement of neighborhood schools.[33] Under this legislation, voters in specified residential areas elect Local School Councils (LSCs), each of which consists of six parents, two community members, two teachers, the principal, and for high schools, a student. These LSCs were granted considerable responsibility, including the hiring and firing of school principals, who no longer hold tenure in their respective buildings. LSCs annually allocate substantial funds for school improvements (that previously were controlled by the central administration), and nearly all aspects of the school's curriculum and management come under their purview. Similarly, principals gained substantial authority under the Reform Act, including the right to hire new teachers without regard to seniority.[34] Finally, in order to protect the newly established autonomy of local school communities, the Reform Act specifically delimited the central office's authority to intervene in local matters and sought to reduce their actual capacity to do so.

A basic premise of this reform was that improving urban schools required stronger social ties between local school professionals and the parents and community whom they are responsible for serving. By establishing school community governance and by devolving substantial resources and authority to it, a context and rationale for collective local action was enjoined. Although the reform created opportunities for improvement, it did not lay out an explicit blueprint for all schools to follow. Rather, an outburst of diverse local initiatives

ensued. This created a natural experiment for investigating differences in school change processes and ultimately proved a good site for examining the significance of trust relations in efforts to improve school effectiveness. Not surprisingly, some school communities in Chicago dramatically moved forward, but others did not.[35] By examining this variability among school communities in their processes of reform and its effects, we were able to glean insights about how local actors effectively engage one another around improving their schools.

Unique Research Resources

The results reported here draw on a larger collegial effort to research school reform and improvement in Chicago. Through this extraordinary collaboration, a ten-year body of both quantitative and qualitative evidence has been assembled on school-community change and its impact on student learning. The basic conceptualization of social trust as a resource for school improvement, developed herein, draws on field observations from longitudinal case studies of twelve Chicago elementary schools, conducted by the Center for School Improvement at the University of Chicago. In addition to these systematic case studies, we also had access to clinical observations from center staff who were actively involved on a daily basis supporting change efforts in several Chicago public elementary schools over this same period.[36] This combination of field notes and informal clinical observations helped us to elaborate an empirically grounded theory about the nature and function of social trust in school communities.

Complementing this field-based evidence are the large-scale quantitative data resources assembled by the Consortium on Chicago School Research. Founded in 1990, the Consortium is a federation of Chicago-area researchers and policy advocates and their organizations who have committed collective efforts to ongoing research on the conditions of education in the city, the progress of its various reforms, and more generally, an agenda of research to inform reform. The Consortium has assembled a large, integrated, longitudinal database on the students, schools, and communities of Chicago. The database includes: Chicago public school data from both students' administrative records and test score files; school-community information assembled from the school system, other public agencies, and the U.S. Census; and periodic general purpose surveys developed and administered by the Consortium to track local school change efforts. The data resources of the Consortium allow us to rigorously evaluate our claims about social trust and its effects on teachers' work

and student learning. Taken together, the practice-based observations of the Center for School Improvement and the data archive assembled by the Consortium create an unparalleled set of information resources for research on urban school reform.