1. Three Perspectives on Family – School Relations

Three perspectives currently guide researchers and practitioners in their thinking about family and school relations:

- Separate responsibilities of families and schools
- Shared responsibilities of families and schools
- Sequential responsibilities of families and schools.

The three perspectives are profoundly different. Assumptions based on the *separate* responsibilities of institutions stress the inherent incompatibility, competition, and conflict between families and schools. This perspective assumes that school bureaucracies and family organizations are directed, respectively, by educators and parents whose different goals, roles, and responsibilities are best fulfilled independently. It asserts that the distinct goals of the two institutions are achieved most efficiently and effectively when teachers maintain their professional, universalistic standards and judgments about the children in their classrooms, and when parents maintain their personal attention, and particularistic standards and judgments about their children at home (Parsons, 1959; Waller, 1932; Weber, 1947).

The opposing assumptions based on *shared* responsibilities of institutions emphasize the coordination, cooperation, and complementarity of schools and families, and encourage communication and collaboration between the two institutions. This perspective assumes that schools and families share responsibilities for the socialization and education of the child. Teachers and parents are believed to share common goals for their children that are achieved most effectively when teachers and parents work together. These assumptions are based on models of inter – institutional interactions and ecological designs that emphasize the natural, nested, and necessary connections between individuals and their groups and organizations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Leichter, 1974; Litwak and Meyer, 1974).

1.1 Understanding the Contrasting Theories: Mechanisms Producing Family – School Relations

In addition to the three major theoretical distinctions between separate, shared, and sequential responsibilities, there are other theories that help explain the *mechanisms* for building family and school relations and the resulting variations in the connections between institutions and their members. Among the most useful are symbolic interactionist and reference group theories. Symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) assumes that self – concept, personality, values, and beliefs are products of our interactions with others. The theory suggests that we learn how others perceive and anticipate our goals and behaviors, and that we fashion our behavior to fulfill the expectations of others and to receive their recognition. In terms of family and school connections, if teachers do not interact with parents, they cannot be informed about nor understand the parents' expectations for their children and for the teachers. And, they cannot shape their teaching behavior to be responsive to those expectations. If parents avoid teachers, they cannot be informed about or understand the schools' expectations for their children or for the parents. And, they cannot shape their behavior to provide useful assistance to the students and teachers.

Reference group theory (Merton, 1968) makes other important connections between esteem and interaction. A reference group is a collectivity or an individual who is taken into consideration by another group or individual to influence their attitudes and behaviors. This happens when one group or individual recognizes the importance of the other or admires the positions and actions of the other. For example, if, in planning children's educational program, a teacher considers the part parents can play, it may be because the teacher holds parents as an important reference group. If, in planning their family activities, parents take the teachers' or schools' goals and actions into account, it may be because they consider teachers an important reference group. Sometimes only the higher status group influences the behavior the other, in an unreciprocated pattern. Teachers may take parents into account without parents reciprocating the consideration, as in some communities where parents are in strong control over educational politics and

1.2 Understanding the Contrasting Theories: Changing Patterns in Family – School Relations

Historically, there have been important changes in the patterns of partnerships between the home and school. In the early 19th century, parents and the communmity greatly controlled the actions of the schools. The home, church, and school supported the same goals for learning and for the integration of the student into the adult community (Prentice and Houston, 1975). The community, including parents and church representatives, hired and fired the teachers, determined the school calendar, and influenced the curriculum. When the students were not in school, the families and others in the community taught their children important skills and knowledge needed for success in adulthood.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, a different pattern of family and school relations emerged. Increasingly, the school began to distance itself from the home by emphasizing the teachers' special knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy. Teachers began to teach subjects that were not familiar to parents, using methods and approaches that were not part of the parents' experiences. The family was asked to teach children good behavior and attitudes to prepare children for school, and to take responsibility for teaching children about their ethnicity, religion, and family origins. These family responsibilities were separate from the schools' goal to teach a common curriculum to children from all ethnic, religious, social, and economic groups.

Over the past two decades, family – school relations have changed again in response to increased demands from the public for better, more accountable schools. Both better – educated parents *and* less – educated parents want a good education for their children and are requesting or requiring schools to keep them informed about and involved in their children's education.

2. An Integrated Theory of Family–School Relations

Changing times require changing theories. School and family relationships have been different at different times in history. It is not surprising, then, to see a restructuring of theories from inter–institutional separation in the 1930s–1950s to cooperation between schools and families in the 1970s–1980s in order to accommodate the social changes affecting these organizations. But we do not yet have a model of family–school relations that accounts for the variation and process of change that will continue to influence the interactions of families and schools. The existing theories omit attention to history, student development, and the influence families and schools have on each other.