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## Reexamining Social Class Differences in the Availability and the Educational Utility of Parental Social Capital

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*Emergent ethnographic research disentangles “social capital” from other components of social class (e.g., material and human capital) to show how class-stratified parental social networks exacerbate educational inequality among schoolchildren. The authors build upon this research by using survey data to reexamine whether certain forms of parental social capital create educational advantages for socioeconomically privileged students vis-à-vis their less economically fortunate peers. By drawing a distinction between the availability of social capital and its convertibility, the authors find that whereas larger stocks of parental social capital accompany higher rungs on the social class ladder, its educational utility is less clearly associated with class status. A possible exception to this pattern pertains to the educational utility of middle-class parents’ ideas about the collective efficacy of influencing school policies and practices. At issue is whether a more inclusive understanding of the material and sociological reasons for educational inequality can spur educationally useful social exchange among parents across social class boundaries.*

**KEYWORDS:** middle schools, parental networks, social capital, social class

Hurricane Katrina violently exposed the yawning gap between America’s haves and have-nots but also brought to the surface forms of inequality that were not only material but also *sociological* (Scheiber, 2005). Although material resources, such as an automobile with a full tank of gas, fueled the engine of escape for many survivors, others relied on the resources embedded in their social networks to facilitate, for example, access to cheap hotel rooms and inexpensive rental properties in the wake of the disaster (Wilgoren, 2005). When it comes to equations of success and failure, money, know-how, and friends play important, interrelated roles. Such is true also for students’ performance in school, although the point has not yet been strongly emphasized by research.

Although there exists an extensive school finance literature on how education dollars are spent and to what effect, *few studies have investigated the educational implications of people networks as potentially useful resources*, and fewer still have pursued the question of how relationship configurations contribute to educational stratification. With a nod to well-known debates in school finance about whether and how money matters (Hanushek, 1989; Hedges, Laine, & Greenwald, 1994), in this study, we ask whether “who you know” should be considered a resource that influences student performance, and if so, whether the impact differs by social class. Specifically, we use survey data to examine whether social ties that are valuable between middle schools and parent networks are actually *more* available and educationally beneficial to materially advantaged students in comparison with those whose parents are less well off.

## Theoretical Framework

### Linking Notions of *Embeddedness* to Educational Performance

By making the assumption that economic behavior is only minimally affected by social ties, mainstream economic schemes often overlook the centrality of social relationships in economic action (Uzzi, 1996). A similar criticism might also be leveled in the field of education research, and school finance in particular, in which social networks and relationship dynamics are often overlooked and underspecified in debates about school resources (Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003). Those who have linked economic and sociological accounts of business behavior (Granovetter, 1985; Loury, 1977) find that deeply embedded within workplace transactions are relationship dynamics that can grease the wheels of economic exchange (Zukin & DiMaggio, 1990) or bring them to a halt (Uzzi, 1996).<sup>1</sup> If discovering links between economic and sociological thought helps explain market transactions, we suggest that further disciplinary bridging can shed light on the embedded value of social dynamics in the field of education. Spurred on by ethnographers whose emergent work links economic and sociological accounts of students' performance in schools (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2000, 2002, 2003), we investigate the correlative notion that social relationships help shape students' educational trajectories by either facilitating or derailing

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the exchange of educationally relevant resources.<sup>2</sup> In this pursuit, social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988) guides our research.

### Social Capital: Functional Versus Critical Interpretations

Arguably the most influential concept to emerge from economic sociology in the past 20 years, *social capital* is reflected in “the capacity of individuals to command scarce resources by virtue of their membership in networks or broader social structures” (Portes, 1998, p. 12). Wherever interpersonal and communal social ties are exploited for the accumulation and exchange of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) as well as human capital (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961), social capital is also at work (Coleman, 1988). Thus, the conversion of actual or potential resources embedded in social networks into other more tangible kinds of capital, a conversion that occurs via social exchange, receives considerable attention from social scientists who study individual agency and social structure from a network perspective.

Sociologist James Coleman and French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu are most commonly recognized for introducing fundamental, albeit markedly different, conceptions of social capital to the study of social phenomena (Portes, 1998; Smith & Kulynych, 2002; Woolcock, 1998). Whereas Coleman (1988) emphasized the educational utility in norm-driven social networks and relations of trust (Schneider, 2000), Bourdieu (1986) took pains to illuminate the reproduction of power and privilege that accompanies the inequitable distribution and utility of social capital across social classes (Baron, Field, & Schuller, 2000; Lin, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2004). Coleman’s influential functionalist interpretations have been most commonly used to study the beneficial impact of social capital on school-related outcomes (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Putnam, 2000). Yet Bourdieu’s more critical insights into the many ways that social interaction not only facilitates but can also *obstruct* the exchangeability of various kinds of capital are beginning to capture the attention of education researchers (Fuller & Hannum, 2002; Noguera, 2003; Ream, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). In this study, we consider both the functional (i.e., educationally useful) and the reproductive (i.e., class-stratified) properties of various *forms* of parental social capital<sup>3</sup> through the lens of social class.

### Field Research Linking Social Capital and Social Class

Amid the rapidly expanding literature on social capital in educational research (Dika & Singh, 2002; Goddard, 2003), school ethnographies merit special attention for revealing *how* social interaction and the meaning making between individuals and within groups facilitate for some people, even while inhibiting for others, the accumulation and exchange of various kinds of educationally useful resources (Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau, 2000, 2002, 2003). These studies also indicate how social capital may function differently across class groupings. Drawing on a well-established European tradition that

perceives social class position as centrally responsible for the production and reproduction of educational inequalities,<sup>4</sup> these field studies conclude that links between schools and parent networks are *more available* and *educationally beneficial* to upper- and middle-class students compared with children from lower-class families. Collective efforts of comparably wealthy parents may, for example, influence school practices in ways that purported kinship-based and go-it-alone actions of the working poor, however forceful, do not. If links between actors in social groups are themselves dyadic and communal resources that facilitate the interchangeability of other kinds of more tangible resources such as information and money (Bourdieu, 1986), then the things of value that some individuals lay claim to by way of group membership may come at the expense of outsiders who are often less effective in making such claims. Accordingly, we investigate whether such findings from the field and the complex inferences drawn from them can be built upon to further measure and quantify the availability and the educational utility of parental social capital relative to social class.

### The Current Study

Informing concerns about inequitable school funding schemes (Berne & Stiefel, 1999) as well as more recent adequacy-based school finance (Odden & Picus, 2003), survey research has made extensive contributions to the debate on how money matters in schools (Grissmer, Flanagan, & Williamson, 1997; Hanushek, 1989; Hedges et al., 1994). Yet few quantitative studies have addressed the critical sociological concern illuminated by the field studies listed above: specifically, how “who you know” contributes concretely to children’s educational trajectories and whether these contributions differ by social class. Using nationally representative survey data concentrated on adolescent eighth graders and their parents, we pursue two hypotheses to address this oversight. The first suggests that educationally valuable parental social ties are more available among socioeconomically advantaged students in comparison with those who are less well off. The second hypothesis draws an important distinction between the distribution of social capital and its educational utility by considering not only whether the *availability* of parental social capital differs across the families of upper-, middle- or working-, and lower-class youth but also whether the rate of its *convertibility* into students’ track placement and test-score performance differs by social class. We examine these hypotheses via the following research questions:

- Are there differences (across upper-, middle- or working-, and lower-class groupings) in the availability of various forms of parental social capital as measured during the eighth grade school year?
- Is parental social capital convertible into measurable educational outcomes, including eighth grade track placement and test scores, and does its rate of convertibility differ across social class groupings?

Acknowledging disagreement over neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian conceptualizations of social class (Wright, 1997), we operationalize three broad class groupings in order to speak directly to the aforementioned field studies. Our approach thereby considers whether parental social capital is available in different amounts and has unequal exchange value, which might yield a greater educational “margin of profit” for students who are already advantaged by virtue of their parents’ combined level of education, income, and occupational status. It could be, alternatively, that the three groups of students have access to the same forms of parental social capital available in similar amounts, except that one group proves better capable of activating network resources for educational benefit, perhaps as a consequence of differences in social skill, or of specific opportunities for using social capital, or of structural or subtle contextual features that vary among groups.

Although our investigative methods differ from those used in the aforementioned field studies, our results at least partly support theirs, specifically insofar as we also conclude that families situated on the higher rungs of the class ladder possess larger stocks of parental social capital. This important finding suggests that tangible material resources as well as less recognizable social network configurations (such as parents’ relationships with their children, with other parents, and with school personnel) contribute to the process of educational stratification. Be that as it may, our data indicate that the utility of parental social capital may not neatly adhere to the architecture of social class. Students from families on the lower rungs of the class ladder appear less likely to benefit from parental social capital not because it is of less educational utility to them but because their parents tend to possess educationally beneficial forms of social capital in smaller amounts. Especially illustrative of this data pattern is the unequal distribution of the informal and educationally useful exchange of resources (e.g., information and school-oriented dispositions) between parents and students away from school. In an exception to this pattern, parents’ notions about collective efficacy in influencing school policies and practices emerge as a particularly salient test-score predictor for students in the middle-class grouping. Thus, although class-based differences in the availability of social capital matter, there may also be variation in the educational utility of certain *forms* of parental social capital that work to the particular advantage of middle-class students.

## Literature Review

### The Educational Utility of Parental Social Capital

There is by now a substantial literature on the educational impact of parents’ informal interactions with their own children (Catsambis, 2001; Clark, 1993; Epstein, 2001; Park & Palardy, 2004; Steinberg, 2001), on parents’ more formally organized relationships with other parents (Carbonaro, 1998; Coleman, 1990; Muller, 1995), and with institutional agents and school personnel (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Comer, 1980; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Epstein,

1992; Fan & Chen, 1999; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Schneider & Coleman, 1993; Singh, Beckley, Trivette, Keith, & Keith, 1995).<sup>5</sup> Although few of these studies are couched in the terminology of social capital, they largely reflect Coleman's (1988) functionalist conception of parental social capital as a network-based resource that facilitates student achievement. In fact, education researchers have begun to use the concept of social capital explicitly in their inquiries concerning parental involvement in children's lives, both at home and in the formal school setting (Parcel & Menaghan, 1994). Such studies use variables that reflect parent-child discussions, homework support, and parent participation in children's schooling as individual items contributing to the operationalization of composite or "latent" measures of family and parental social capital (McNeal, 1999; Ream, 2005; White & Kaufman, 1997). Nevertheless, these distinctions in terminology, say, between parental involvement and parental social capital, may be more semantic than substantive. Indeed, many of the parental involvement behaviors noted above fit nicely within the rubric of social capital precisely because parents' interactions with their children, other parents, and school personnel are all important means by which parents bestow human capital (e.g., information and know-how) upon their children (Hao & Bonstetac-Bruns, 1998; McNeal, 1999).

*Informal parent-child relations.* Some research on parent involvement and social capital in the family domain addresses informal education-oriented parent-child interactions within the home, including, for example, course selection or homework assistance (Clark, 1983, 1993; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994). Still other studies tout the importance of parent-initiated educational and cultural activities, such as visiting museums or attending concerts, that expose children to wonders outside the home (Kao & Tienda, 1998). In both lines of research, it is apparent that when parents use interactive strategies that are warm yet consistently firm to clarify and enforce developmentally appropriate educational expectations, their children do better in school and end up eventually attending better schools (Arvizu, 1996; Steinberg, 2001).<sup>6</sup> In this vein, Keith et al. (1998) measured parent-child relationships at the 8th grade level to predict 10th grade school performance, finding that parental social capital manifested in parents' interactions with their children had a positive impact on adolescents' school grades across racial and ethnic groups. Another study used nationally representative survey data to demonstrate the benefit of parent-child interactions regarding course selection and school programs on children's reading and mathematics achievement (Sui-Chu Ho & Willms, 1996). Beyond the constructive results of healthy family-based parent-student relations on individual students, there is also the benefit to schools themselves. Not surprisingly, student achievement rises collectively when students attend schools with elevated levels of parental involvement (Pong, 1998). Yet parents of different social classes tend to raise children differently. Research suggests that among poor families and within working-class homes, deliberative "talk" and verbal jousting between parents and children is relatively limited (Hart &

Risley, 1995). Poor and working-class parents are more likely to issue brusque orders instead of using tactics, such as reasoning and explanation, commonly used by economically advantaged parents (Lareau, 2003). Moreover, children in poor and working-class homes are, on average, less frequently read to and encouraged to read than are their middle-class counterparts (Hoffereth & Sandberg, 2001). Although class-based differences in parenting styles and involvement are not the rule—as there are many impoverished and working-class parents who use their funds of knowledge (Delpit, 1995; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Vélez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 1992) to engage in creative and interpretive interactions with their children, even as there are middle- and upper-class parents who do not—such patterns do exist and can be linked to class-based variation in students' performance in school (Rothstein, 2004; Steinberg, 2001).

*Formal parent relations with other parents and school personnel.* Of course, parents also act as advocates for their children beyond the boundaries of the immediate family, most obviously within the school system (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Muller & Kerbow, 1993). Parent-initiated contact with other parents and with school personnel suggests forms of parental social capital whereby parents' effective sociability often brings about higher levels of academic achievement and educational attainment in their children (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Networking with the parents of other schoolchildren may provide not only feedback on effective child-rearing strategies but also access to crucial information about school policies, teachers, and students' peers (Carbonaro, 1998). This makes it possible for parents to work in unison to keep tabs on their children (Coleman, 1988) and to collaborate with one another so as to influence school personnel (Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1997). Horvat et al. (2003) found that the middle-class parents of elementary school children proved uniquely able to build and draw on social capital manifested in their contacts with other professionals, effectively leveraging the information, expertise, and authority needed to contest the judgments of school officials. Indeed, upper- and middle-class parents often proceed from a distinct class-based sense of entitlement, using a strategy of "concerted cultivation" to influence school personnel on behalf of their children (Lareau, 2000, 2002, 2003). In exercising this strategy, parents aim to directly facilitate their children's educational and social growth through strategic institutional interventions.<sup>7</sup> Both individual and collective social engagement with institutional agents at the school site pay off: Students whose parents participate in school activities and maintain contact with school personnel typically demonstrate elevated academic performance levels (Epstein, 2001; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Yet a few studies have reported, perhaps counterintuitively, that parent involvement can be negatively associated with grades and test scores (Catsambis, 2001). These findings may be partly explained by other research observing, for example, that parents whose children have academic or behavior problems are more apt to get involved and to seek help from schools (Fan & Chen, 1999;

Shumow & Miller, 2001). Thus, the benefit of parent involvement on student achievement may be greatly qualified by parents' *reasons* for getting involved, specifically, by whether their involvement follows from strategic forethought or from merely reactive responses to flagging performance or misbehavior of their children at school.

### **Social Class in the Social Exchange of Resources**

Whereas increasing numbers of scholars of education emphasize the role of race and ethnicity in the social dynamics of resource accumulation and exchange (Kao, 2004; Ream, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999),<sup>8</sup> ethnographic work by Horvat et al. (2003) and by Lareau (2000, 2002, 2003) has focused to a greater degree on *social class*, particularly with regard to its influence at the primary school level. There is, of course, substantial evidence showing that race and class characteristics are interwoven (Ortner, 2006) in a historically problematic sociopolitical tapestry (Bolgatz, 2005; Roark, 1978). To this day, entrenched and subjectively ingrained social dispositions (Wacquant, 1989) make it so that racial stereotypes (Steele, 1997) and stigmas (Goffman, 1963; Loury, 2002) affect especially minority children's lives (Gibson, Gándara, & Koyama, 2004; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 1996). Moreover, insofar as objectively observable opportunity structures that are themselves economically determined (Ehrenreich, 2001; MacLeod, 1995) produce a highly disproportionate number of minority students among lower socioeconomic households (Roscigno, 2000; Tienda & Jensen, 1988; Valencia, 2002), we perceive a stubborn correlation between race and poverty that seems almost inevitably linked to diminished access to quality education (Berliner, 2005; Bolgatz, 2005; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Rothstein, 2004). At the same time, in the aftermath of de jure racial discrimination in the United States, some sociologists have documented the declining significance of race, at least in comparison with the importance of social class, in determining educational and employment opportunities as well as adult life trajectories (MacLeod, 1995; Wilson, 1989).<sup>9</sup> When it comes to the educational utility of parents' social connections, for example, Lareau (2003) leads us to conclude that social class overshadows race, although her argument is especially focused on the families of elementary school children. Both she and Horvat et al. (2003) situated their work on social capital and educational reproduction (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Eckert, 1989; Willis, 1977) within a neo-Marxist tradition (Giroux, 1983) that may be less than strictly applicable to the increasingly complex architecture of social class position in the United States.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, their primary point is persuasive: that the social capital of parents, in terms of both its availability and its utility, is circumscribed by broad social class categories so as to benefit especially those who are already materially advantaged and socially connected.

Such studies from the field teach us a great deal about the interactive *processes* entailed in social capital accumulation and also about the agency and meaning making involved in the exchange of resources via social interaction.

All the same, Horvat et al. (2003) were careful to note “the usual caveats concerning qualitative research,” including “its limited generalizability” (p. 346). Because the most valid interpretations of social capital in its complex and varied forms follow from diverse methodological repertoires (Baron et al., 2000), we have used survey data to comment specifically on ethnographic findings about how social class determines the distribution of social capital among parents and its educational utility when deployed by them.

In summary, whereas the *sociological* determinants of educational inequality have often been overlooked, especially in the survey research literature in school finance, emergent ethnographic research situates social capital, particularly resources inhering in the relations between elementary schools and parent networks, squarely within the stratified architecture of social class (Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau, 2000, 2002, 2003). To further investigate these findings, we used survey data to study, particularly, the effect of class-stratified social networks at the middle school level among parents of adolescents in the eighth grade during 1988. We ask not only whether the accumulation of parental social capital is contingent on social class but whether its convertibility into students' track placement and test-score performance is delineated along class lines.

## Method

### Data Source

Base-year (1988) data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), a nationally representative longitudinal panel study of a cohort of approximately 25,000 eighth graders, were used in this investigation.<sup>11</sup> According to the NELS two-stage stratified sample design, schools were first selected, and then students within schools were subsequently sampled.<sup>12</sup> NELS includes information from students and their parents, teachers, and school administrators. We analyzed data from the base-year parent and student surveys because such data provide extensive information on family background, including socioeconomic status (SES), family composition (i.e., the number of parents in the household and their relationships to the children), and race and ethnicity. Students' eighth grade track placement and achievement test scores are also documented in NELS. Along these lines, NELS also lends itself to the development of latent constructs of parental social capital, as numerous variables in the student questionnaire measure school-related interactions between students and their parents, while many parent items measure the relations between parents and schools. To compensate for nonrandom sampling techniques and unequal selection probabilities, we imputed sampling weights.<sup>13</sup> Missing values were handled using the full-information maximum likelihood estimator available with Mplus software. The degree of missingness on our observed variables ranged from 0% to 13.6%, with an average of less than 3%. Students in the sample were retained as long as they had valid observations on at least one predictor in the model.

### Approximating Social Class Groups

Because our goal was to arrive at comparative class-based analyses, we divided our sample of students into three broad social class groupings: upper, middle and working, and lower classes. The SES composite, which is approximately normal in distribution, consists of five equally weighted components, including mother's and father's educational attainment and occupational status, as well as family income. We classified students with SES scores of 1 or more standard deviations above the mean of the entire sample as "upper class" ( $n = 4,227$ ), students with SES scores between +1 and -1 standard deviation as "middle and working class" ( $n = 15,822$ ), and students with SES scores falling 1 or more standard deviations below the mean as "lower class" ( $n = 4,192$ ). Our overall sample consisted of students with valid base-year data ( $n = 24,241$ ).

### Dependent Variables

We used two educational outcomes: a latent construct of academic achievement and an indicator of students' track placement. Clearly, parents' direct interactions with their own children can facilitate the development of skills and capabilities, resulting in improved test scores, but parents may also use concerted strategies through which they attempt to influence key institutional personnel, who make decisions on matters such as track placement. According to our hypotheses, each of these outcome measures is influenced by parental activation of social capital. From the results of 8th grade standardized tests in math, reading, science, and history (which were administered in the spring of 1988, toward the completion of the academic year), we were able to estimate an achievement construct.<sup>14</sup> The four-subject test composite provides a more comprehensive indicator of achievement than any single cognitive test could. Additionally, we constructed the tracking outcome measure from four NELS variables that indicate whether a student was enrolled in advanced, enriched, and accelerated academic courses in math, English, science, or social studies. Students enrolled in two or more such courses were classified as high track.<sup>15</sup>

### Background Variables

There remains some debate as to whether the impact of social capital on educational outcomes is a function of social class, race and ethnicity, or some combination of the two (Lareau, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Although this study focuses mainly on social class differences, we attempt to disentangle the effects of class and race by controlling for race and ethnicity in our models. In addition, we have controlled for family structure so as to isolate further the degree to which social class affects parents' ability to convert social capital into educational outcomes. Moreover, we have also included controls for student SES *within* each class category, because the impact of social capital on educational outcomes may covary by SES within each of the three class groupings.

## Measuring Parental Social Capital

Given the complexity of the social aspects of resource exchange, scholarship on social capital often suffers from conceptual incoherence and a lack of consistency in the way its various forms are measured (Baron et al., 2000; Dika & Singh, 2002; McNeal, 1999). With this in mind, we selected NELS items that approximate both *informal* interaction between parents and their children and *formal* interactions between parents and other adults.<sup>16</sup> In this way, we were able to measure social capital across familial and extrafamilial domains, accounting for quantity (i.e., the existence of a relationship) and quality (i.e., the nature of that relationship). Because behaviors, in contrast to attitudes, are amenable to external verification, we searched the data for parent involvement in school-related activities, taking such involvement as a proxy measure of social capital. Eventually, we developed four latent constructs pertaining to various forms of parental social capital:

- Parents Help Student: a five-item construct including the frequency of parent-student discussions about course selection, school activities, things studied in class, and planning high school programs.
- Parents Visit School: a three-item construct including parents' class visits, attendance at school meetings, and attendance at school events such as concerts, sports competitions, and so on.
- PTA Involvement: a three-item construct including PTA membership, attendance at PTA meetings, and participation in PTA-sponsored activities.
- Parents Influence School: a two-item construct including parents' reports as to whether parents have an adequate say in setting school policy and whether they work together to support school policy.

Most of the observed variables used in the social capital constructs are ordinal in measurement scale.<sup>17</sup> Within our statistical models, all such variables were treated as ordered categorical variables, and this allowed us to be as precise as possible in our parameter estimates and model fit computations. Given this measurement issue and because NELS is a publicly available data set, we felt that covariance matrices for each group were not the best way of presenting these data. Instead, we provide descriptive statistics for each measured variable categorized by social class grouping and note that the data can be obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics (see <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/nels88/>).

## Conceptual Framework and Statistical Models

We studied the educational utility of parental social capital by social class using structural equation modeling (SEM) techniques to investigate the time-ordered path modeled here by our conceptual framework (see Figure 1). Although the framework also accounts for family background, we focused primarily on how various forms of parental social capital influence educational processes and outcomes across upper-, middle- and working-, and lower-class

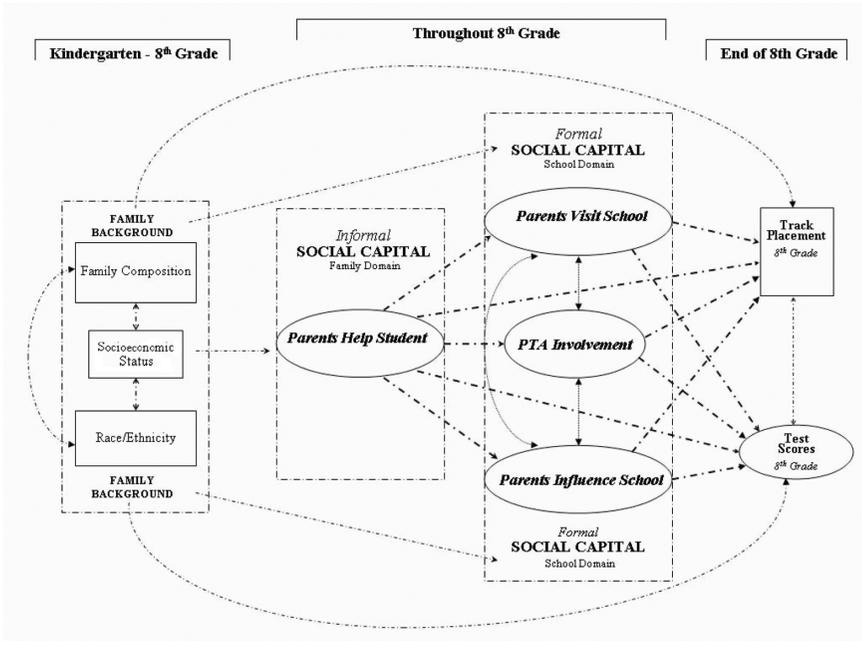


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

youth. Informal parent-student relations at home precede and may also be conditioned by the information and resource exchange that takes place in more formal institutionalized settings among parents who are actively involved in their children’s education.<sup>18</sup> Thus, in our framework, the latent construct Parents Help Student is modeled as an antecedent to the more formal social capital constructs, as each influences eighth grade track placement and test scores (note that all latent constructs appear in Figure 1, according to structural modeling convention, as ovals).

SEM is highly suitable for the purposes of this investigation for several reasons. First, our framework includes measurement and structural components that SEM combines into a single model. The measurement component estimates latent constructs of parental social capital and of academic achievement. By using multiple observed variables and accounting for measurement error in the estimates of our latent constructs, SEM estimates tend to be superior to those provided by a single measured variable, a simple composite score, or a factor score. SEM is also suitable for testing whether the hypothesized measurement model fits the data adequately. The structural component models the hypothesized association between latent constructs in a multivariate fashion, allowing for both direct and indirect effects in the examination of causal pathways. The multiple-group structural equation model

used in our study is specifically designed to test for group (social class) differences in the estimated associations between parental social capital and educational outcomes. By fitting the model to the upper-, middle- and working-, and lower-class samples simultaneously, we test whether associations (i.e., path coefficients) differ across groups. Stated another way, the multiple-group model enabled us to test, while controlling for student background characteristics, whether the impact of social capital on track placement and test scores differs across social class categories.

## Results

The results are presented in two main sections. First, descriptive analyses offer class-based comparisons of eighth grade students' family background characteristics, track placement, and test scores. We also test for statistical differences in the availability of parental social capital across social class groupings. Last, we consider the educational utility of various forms of parental social capital, again by social class.

### Descriptive Findings

*Background characteristics.* Descriptions of the NELS data show that race and class characteristics are interwoven to the disadvantage of minority groups. Blacks and Hispanics constitute nearly half of the student population in the lowest class category (24% and 23%, respectively) and just 9% of the upper-class grouping, as seen in Table A1 in the Appendix. Family structure is also deeply related to social class, as fewer than half (48%) of the students in the lowest class grouping lived with both parents, whereas 64% in the middle class grouping and 82% in the highest class grouping were living with both parents.

*Track placement and test scores.* It must be noted, however, that the data do not unequivocally support the premise that social class disadvantage accompanies low track placement.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, a greater proportion of low-SES eighth graders (39%) than of working- and middle-class students (32%) were enrolled in two or more advanced academic courses. Yet students in the highest class grouping were most apt to enroll in high-track courses (42%). Even though the data on track placement do not unequivocally support the notion that social class exercises a determinative influence on course placement, a more consistent class-based hierarchy emerges when it comes to certain measurable results in academic achievement. Average test scores among eighth graders in the lowest class grouping paled in comparison to those of the working and middle class, whose scores in turn fell short of their upper-class counterparts (Table A1). In mathematics, for example, students in the lowest class grouping averaged 39 points on the NELS math test, working- and middle-class students averaged 44 points, and students from the highest SES grouping averaged 51 points. Similar stepwise test score patterns are borne out in

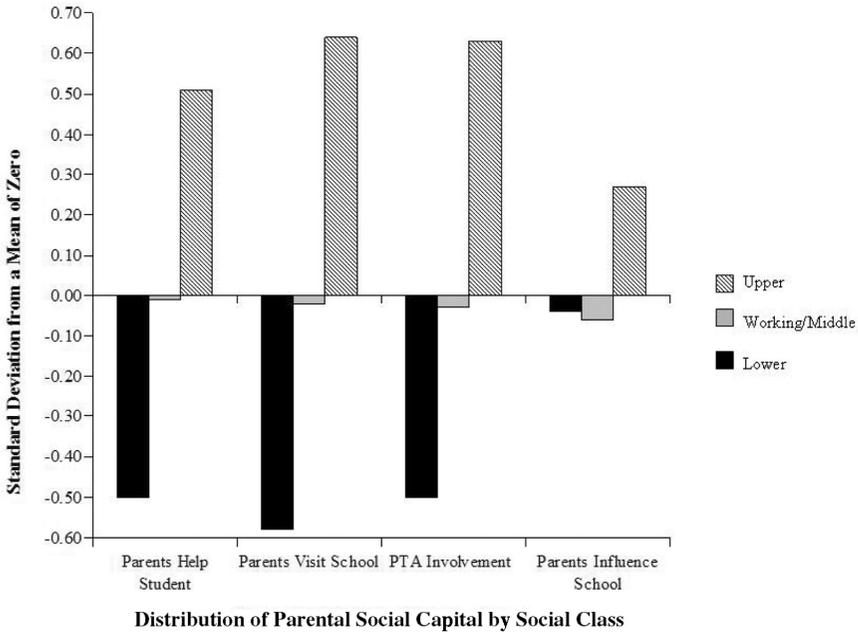
reading, science, and history.<sup>20</sup> Thus, although the data on track placement do not consistently support notions of educational reproduction, test score findings corroborate research that similarly describes stratified race and class demographics (vis-à-vis educational outcomes) throughout the United States (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Massey & Eggers, 1990; Valencia, 2002).

*The distribution of parental social capital.* Ethnographic research has effectively demonstrated that middle-class social networks are more replete with resources than those of the economically disadvantaged. But survey analyses have yet to consider the distribution of various forms of social capital by social class. The results of an analysis of variance (depicted in Figure 2) suggest that average levels of parental social capital within the highest class grouping rise well above the sample mean, whereas social capital among the lowest class grouping falls below the mean of the sample, in fact by at least 0.5 standard deviations in the case of three of the four latent constructs, including Parents Help Student, Parents Visit School, and PTA Involvement.<sup>21</sup> Among families in the highest social class category, for example, the latent construct Parents Help Student averages 0.51 standard deviations above the mean for the entire sample, whereas those in the lowest social class grouping average 0.50 standard deviations below the sample mean. For Parents Visit School, the discrepancy is even larger, as upper-class families register at a sizable 0.64 standard deviations above the sample mean, even as the lowest class grouping registers at  $-0.58$  standard deviation. And PTA Involvement is reportedly far more prevalent among parents in the highest class grouping (0.63 standard deviations) than among the lowest ( $-0.50$  standard deviations). Among the working and middle class, parental social capital hovers around the mean for the entire sample.

On the whole, then, average levels of parental social capital differ significantly across the three social class groupings.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the highest social class grouping, in comparison with the middle- and working-class grouping and in particular the lowest SES grouping, is not only by definition advantaged in material and human capital resources but also possessed of a significant edge in terms of the availability of the particular forms of parental social capital measured in this study.

### **The Utility of Parental Social Capital by Social Class**

In attempting to describe the educational utility of parental social capital across the social class groupings, we begin with three general observations derived from the unstandardized parameter estimates depicted in the structural models of Figure 3.<sup>23</sup> First, the positive associations between Parents Help Student and the educational outcomes suggest that even though adolescence is a developmental period that is characterized by increasing individuation from parents and their modes of control (Hartup & Stevens, 1997), students' outcomes improve when parents, regardless of their social



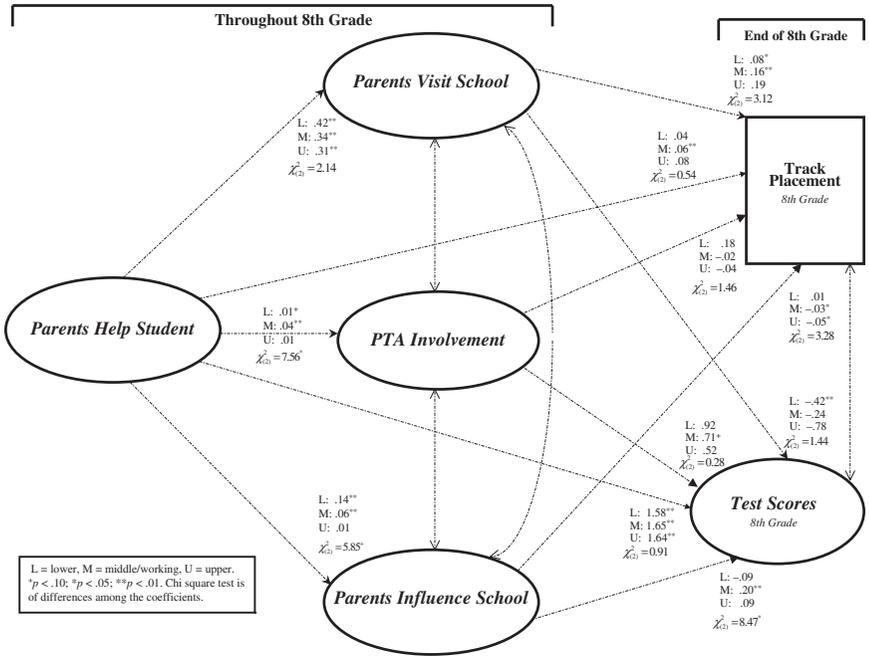
**Figure 2. Mean social class differences pertaining to the availability of various forms of parental social capital.**

Note. Results of an analysis of variance indicate that mean differences in the availability of parental social capital are statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ) across the three social class groups. Sample weighted by base-year sample weight/mean base-year sample weight.

Source. National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, eighth grade students and parents surveyed in 1988.

class, engage in conversations with adolescents about what they do in school and about the subjects they study. Second, even *within* social class groupings, there is considerable variation in the educational utility of the more formal proxies of parental social capital (Parents Visit School, PTA Involvement, and Parents Influence School). Although certain links between formal social capital and our two dependent variables seem insignificant, others prove to be substantial and positive (e.g., the impact of Parents Help Student on test scores), and still others prove surprisingly negative (e.g., the impact of Parents Visit School on the test scores of adolescents in the lowest class category). We address these divergent findings below.

Last, the educational utility (i.e., rate of convertibility) of parental social capital is *not* marked by clear social class distinctions, with one exception that is consistent with the field research findings noted above: The positive



**Figure 3. The educational impact of parental social capital by social class.**

*Note.* Although the model controls for background characteristics (SES, family structure, and race and ethnicity) and estimates covariances between endogenous variables (per Figure 1), these aspects are not central to our thesis and are therefore omitted to improve the readability of Figure 3. The path weights are presented as unstandardized parameter estimates. Individual items that contribute to the latent constructs (depicted as ovals) and all error terms and correlations are excluded from the figure. Tucker-Lewis index = .95, comparative fit index = .94, root mean square error of approximation = .04. Sample weighted by base-year sample weight/mean base-year sample weight.

*Source.* National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, eighth grade students and parents surveyed in 1988.

impact of Parents Influence School is notable particularly in the test scores of middle-class children, who seem especially well situated to benefit from their parents' collective, sometimes politicized, efforts to influence school policy.<sup>24</sup>

Our goal here is to identify distinctions, insofar as they are particular to social class, about the educational impact of parental social capital. In this pursuit, we consider two questions about conditions of evidence: (a) whether parameter estimates (i.e., path coefficients) might prove statistically significant in one social class group but not significant in at least one other group and

(b) whether the *magnitudes* of the parameter estimates in the cases we consider differ significantly across the social class groupings (we use unstandardized parameters as the appropriate metric for making such comparisons).

With various background controls in place, we consider the first category (Evidence Condition 1) as it pertains to data on track placement. Among working- and middle-class adolescents, Parents Help Student slightly improves track placement ( $0.06, p < .01$ ), per the trebled parameters in Figure 3. In this case, however, the placement benefits do not prove significant for the other two groups, nor do the parameter magnitudes differ significantly across groupings. So although we are confident that Parents Help Student slightly improves track placement for adolescents in the working- and middle-class grouping (such that Evidence Condition 1 is satisfied), the actual size of this effect (according to the standard of Evidence Condition 2) does not differ significantly from class to class. In fact, our models did not detect any significant social class differences in the *magnitude of association* between the latent measures of parental social capital and track placement. In the formal school domain, Parents Visit School also improves track placement for lower- ( $0.08, p < .05$ ) and working- and middle-class students ( $0.16, p < .01$ ), but here again, group-level differences in effect size prove not to be statistically significant. None of the links between PTA Involvement and track placement are significant (nor is PTA Involvement significantly associated with eighth grade test scores), although Parents Influence School is in fact negatively associated, if only slightly, with track placement for working- and middle- ( $-0.03, p < .05$ ) and upper-class ( $-0.05, p < .01$ ) students, a somewhat perplexing finding that satisfies Evidence Condition 1 but not Evidence Condition 2.

Considering student achievement, the informal Parents Help Student construct emerges again as an especially beneficial form of parental social capital, one that improves eighth grade test-score performance across lower- ( $1.58, p < .01$ ), working- and middle- ( $1.65, p < .01$ ), and upper-class ( $1.64, p < .01$ ) students. In this case, all three class groups satisfy Evidence Condition 1, although the parameter estimates are of similar magnitude regardless of social class standing. Given that students in the NELS sample improved their composite test scores by approximately 1 standard deviation over 4 years of high school, or about 0.25 standard deviations per year (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005), the standardized parameters in Table A3 shed light on the *magnitudes* of these associations. In fact, an increase of 1 standard deviation in Parents Help Student had an impact on test scores roughly the equivalent of 1 year's worth of schooling or nearly 10 months of learning. This was true for all three student groups (0.25, 0.23, and 0.25 standard deviations, respectively). In other words, even though parents in lower social classes have less schooling and take-home pay than the wealthy, their children also stand to gain a great deal from informal parental involvement, even when that amounts only to talking about the things children do in school and the subjects they study in class.

At the same time, our analysis of the Parents Visit School construct yields some counterintuitive results suggesting that the *reasons* why parents visit school are important. For instance, although the parameters in question are negative in all cases, we are especially confident that parents on the lowest rungs of the class ladder visit school for reasons linked to lower test scores ( $-0.42, p < .01$ ), and at least some research indicates that they visit to address and mitigate behavioral problems (Fan & Chen, 1999; Shumow & Miller, 2001). In this case, then, we are reminded that the educational *utility* of parental social capital depends on a complex set of factors, including which of the many *forms* of social capital are in question, how they are measured, and which outcomes are being considered.

Although differences in the availability of parental social capital may (per Figure 2) be important, there appears to be little variation in the educational utility of parental social capital across the three social class groupings (in short, Evidence Condition 2 has yet to be satisfied). There is, however, one exception to this pattern in the data: The link between Parents Influence School and the eighth grade test scores of middle-class students ( $0.20, p < .01$ ) uniquely satisfies both the test for significance, according to our first criterion, and the test for class-based differences in the magnitude of association, according to our second criterion.<sup>25</sup> In this respect, our findings corroborate field studies pointing to the educational utility of especially middle-class parents' collectively strategic efforts to influence schooling practices (Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau, 2003). Yet Parents Influence School is no more *available* in the middle social class grouping than among the lowest class grouping (see again Figure 2), which raises another question: *Which* are the individual and structural level factors that inhibit the educational utility to be derived from poor parents' notions of collective efficacy at influencing school policies (here the *unstandardized* parameter for the lowest class grouping is a negative, albeit statistically insignificant, 0.09)?

## Discussion

In our view, the *sociological* reasons for educational inequality are often overlooked in equations of adolescents' success and failure in schools. This absence in the research seems especially noticeable in the quantitative literature on school finance. Addressing this oversight, with an eye toward how the interchangeability of various kinds of resources depends on embedded social processes that have traditionally been ignored (Granovetter, 1985; Loury, 1977), we have used nationally representative survey data to build upon field research already focused on the ways in which parental social networks may be implicated in the reproduction of educational inequality (Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau, 2000, 2002, 2003). Again, our descriptive results partly corroborate previous observational findings, as we find that parents at higher rungs of the social class ladder are characterized not only by disproportionate wealth and know-how but also by more bountiful stocks of what counts for this study as parental social capital.

Still, there is a discernable difference between the *potential* and the *actualized* resources inhering in social networks (Bourdieu, 1986). The simple availability of parental social capital does not ensure its activation on behalf of schoolchildren. Although various forms of parental social capital seem especially available in the highest class grouping (per Figure 2), its usefulness among the social class elite is salient only in the association between Parents Help Student and eighth grade test scores (per Figure 3). Conversely, although Parents Visit School is not as readily available in the lowest social class grouping, this may be just as well, because it somewhat surprisingly impinges on test scores of students in that class grouping, a finding that we have conjectured, however, may be attributable to the *reasons* some parents visit classrooms and attend school events. Perhaps the greatest educational value in parental social capital lies, then, in the nexus between its ready accumulation and its being strategically put to use in ways that are educationally beneficial.<sup>26</sup>

Too often, research in the area of social capital has overlooked the multidimensionality of such capital. Within social class groupings, variation in the educational utility of formal measures of parental social capital reveals the extent to which utility is conditioned by its forms. In other words, the usefulness of social capital depends highly on the people who actually possess it and the “fields” (Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993) wherein they attempt its exchange (Ream, 2005). This is attributable to individual differences of skill in accumulating and activating social capital (as parental practices vary even *within* any class grouping of parents), to subtle contextual features, or to discernible structural features that vary within and across social class groupings both in and out of schools. For instance, the fact that many parents who get involved in school do so only when their children act up is a contextual consideration that helps explain the negative association between Parents Visit School and eighth grade test scores for students in the lowest social class grouping. Or, also in this vein, there is the consideration that schools may use structural mechanisms that neutralize parental demands so as to implement a top-down agenda instead of developing one stemming from grassroots parental input (Comer, 1980). So it is that many parent-teacher organizations serve essentially as fundraising groups whereby schools structure parental interactions mainly to serve schools’ interests (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Hess, 1995). That PTA Involvement has no discernible impact on either track placement or test scores is perhaps understandable in this light. Although we have considered here only the *parent* side of parent-school interaction, it seems clear to us that compositional differences across middle schools (including financial inequities in resource *inputs*) account for at least some variation in the educational utility of parental social capital. In the future, we hope to see more school effects research addressing how social capital accumulation and exchange are influenced by links between school finance and the programmatic design of middle schools.

The complexity of our findings challenges us, then, to sort out what can most confidently be reported about parental social capital, its availability, and its utility across social class. Our results belie the notion that parental social capital in the hands of the class elite is by definition *more* fungible than

parental social capital among the less materially well off. Instead, we find that the test score impact of 1 standard deviation increase in Parents Help Student approximates 1 year's worth of schooling or nearly 10 months of learning, and these results occur across social class groupings. Yet one cannot exchange what one does not possess. Thus, students from families on the lower rungs of the social class ladder are less likely to benefit from Parents Help Student not because it is less convertible, per se, but because their parents tend to possess it in lesser amounts. In the social dynamics of educational stratification, the *distribution* of parental social capital may both precede and supersede class-based differences in its educational utility.

There are exceptions to this pattern. Parents Influence School emerges as an especially salient predictor of eighth grade test scores among students in the middle-class grouping, yet as Figure 2 shows, its availability is statistically indistinguishable from the lowest class grouping. One potential explanation for the disutility of Parents Influence School among the poor is a mismatch between home and school cultures (e.g., in language, values, and/or practice differences), which may limit the effectiveness of parental influence (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Goldman & McDermott, 1987; Valdés, 1996). Against such a deduction, however, strong links between Parents Help Student and test scores across all three class groupings severely hampers the applicability of the mismatch argument. A more plausible explanation would seem to reside in the fact that parents on the lowest rungs of the class ladder prove less likely to tap their social networks *for the explicit purpose of exerting power over schooling practices* (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). This conclusion is supported especially by emergent field research on the particular influence of politicized middle-class parent networks (Horvat et al., 2003) and also by the relative lack of respect for and responsiveness to poor parents exhibited by school authorities (Fine, 1993; Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleax, 1999; Noguera, 2001). Added to all of this is the consideration that although lower- and middle-class parents share similar educational goals for their children, their social networks tend not to overlap (Lin, 2001).<sup>27</sup>

Our findings entail perhaps two other implications that merit restating: a first that reaffirms the importance of informal parent-student interaction during children's early adolescence and a second that informs ongoing debates regarding the allocation of resources in school reform efforts. First, some research suggests that the impact of informal parent-student interaction may taper off as children move into adolescence (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995). In her controversial book *The Nurture Assumption*, Judith Harris (1998) claimed that to the extent that adolescent development is influenced by social networks, most often *peers*, not parents, exercise the strongest influence on social behaviors. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that the cumulative effect of parent-student talk, on topics such as (a) course selection, (b) school activities, (c) topics studied in class, and (d) planning a high school program, continues to have an educational impact beyond the elementary school years. Whatever their social class position, parents should continue to "talk school" with their kids, at least through

middle school, as the results apparently contradict the ostensible parent-adolescent divide (Arvizu, 1996; Keith et al., 1998; Sui-Chu Ho & Willms, 1996).

As for resource allocation in school reform efforts, the “new school finance” narrative (Grubb & Huerta, 2001) largely overlooks the potential resources that inhere in social relationships or social capital. Whereas money and material capital are necessary but also insufficient resource inputs for school reform (Clune, 1994), and whereas the distribution of human capital (e.g., teacher quality) certainly contributes to some students’ advancement and others’ educational demise (Grissmer et al., 1997), nevertheless attempts to connect school finance and school reform have largely overlooked the distribution and the utility of various forms of social capital (Odden & Clune, 1998). Ironically, researchers and policy makers can *most* easily address tangible resources (e.g., money and facilities) perhaps less directly associated with students’ learning and are perhaps *least* able to deal with other kinds of resources (e.g., social network configurations that facilitate or inhibit the exchange of educationally important resources) perhaps most directly related to learning (Cohen et al., 2003). Hence, although the school finance literature continues to drift away from equity considerations that should be deemed absolutely crucial, social capital research simultaneously tends to ignore conflict and equity concerns (Horvat et al., 2003), falling altogether short when it comes to answering the proverbial “so what” question so critical to framing effective school reforms (for an important exception, see Bryk & Schneider, 2002).<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

Although it has been suggested that the educational utility of social capital engages the attention of policy makers because it represents a potentially less costly, *noneconomic solution* to social problems (Portes, 1998), our assertions about the educational importance of social capital are certainly not intended to provide an excuse for policy makers to curtail more spending more efficiently on schools and schoolchildren. On the contrary, it is our contention that current disparities in educational resources and in the development of social capital relevant to the educational process constitute a troubling reality: Even as some schools in our system of public education (mostly the well-funded ones) perform exceptionally well, far too many of our young learners languish in underresourced schools set amid already disadvantaged, impoverished communities (Anyon, 2005; Kozol, 2005). Our results suggest that some forms of parental social capital may help compensate for material resource disadvantage but that parents from lower social class positions still struggle to build and/or use formal social networks that might be leveraged on behalf of schoolchildren. So what is to be done to help realize or develop the forms of social capital, specifically those available through the extrafamilial relationship networks, among the working poor?

If well-reasoned designs for incremental *wealth* redistribution have not proved to this point in time to be a politically palatable answer, then perhaps policy makers might devote themselves to designing a social infrastructure for

schooling that would bolster social exchange between resource-rich parents and those who are economically disadvantaged. Schools offer an important location for building social capital because, as the evidently most reliable source of social support for children, they are among the few stable institutions through which parents connect with each other (Ream, 2005; Saegert, Thompson, & Warren, 2001). A growing body of literature highlights the extent to which effective school reform is predicated on a *social paradigm* in which relationships within formal settings are revealed to be dramatically important to low-status youth (Maeroff, 1998; Noguera, 2001; Ream & Stanton-Salazar, 2007), in which case one of our central tasks must be to bring extant and developing social capital to bear in such a way as to strengthen those relationships. We have demonstrated that the social capital of parents does produce educational utility, if not always in perfectly consistent patterns, and this benefit occurs across all classes. There is an opportunity here, then, for parent networks to function across class. Although no one has come up with a reliable formula to produce solidarity among parents across social class boundaries—social ties are always embedded “in the context of interlocking class, race, and gender hierarchies” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 9)—the very fact that the role of parents in their children’s education is not fixed (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001) might well be encouraging. For, as our study brings to mind, social capital, with its educational benefits, can be altered by critically reflective and politically active parents (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991), by progressive institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2001), and by creative—and not altogether inexpensive—school programs (see Henderson & Mapp, 2002) designed to foster synergistic, empowered parental networks.<sup>29</sup>

Appendix  
Table A1  
**Means and Standard Deviations of Variables by Social Class Groups**

Variable	<i>M (SD)</i>				Description (NELS:88 label)
	Total	Lower	Working and Middle	Upper	
Sample size	24,241	4,192	15,822	4,227	
Student background					
Asian	0.03 (0.18)	0.03 (0.16)	0.03 (0.18)	0.06 (0.23)	(BYRACE = 1)
Black	0.13 (0.34)	0.24 (0.43)	0.12 (0.32)	0.05 (0.22)	(BYRACE = 2)
Hispanic	0.10 (0.30)	0.23 (0.42)	0.08 (0.27)	0.04 (0.18)	(BYRACE = 3)
Naïve	0.04 (0.20)	0.05 (0.22)	0.05 (0.21)	0.02 (0.14)	(BYRACE = 5)
SES	-0.13 (0.77)	-1.26 (0.29)	-0.08 (0.43)	1.08 (0.25)	Composite of family income, parents' education, and occupational prestige (BYSES)
Traditional family	0.64 (0.48)	0.48 (0.50)	0.64 (0.48)	0.82 (0.39)	Lives with both birth parents (F1S92A or FIS92D)
Educational outcomes					
Academic track	0.35 (0.48)	0.39 (0.49)	0.32 (0.47)	0.42 (0.49)	Student is enrolled in two or more advanced, enriched, or accelerated academic courses (BYS66A-D)
Reading	45.52 (8.64)	40.50 (7.22)	45.58 (8.29)	51.48 (8.06)	Reading IRT q score (BY2XRTH)
Math	44.07 (8.63)	38.77 (6.91)	44.08 (8.14)	50.95 (8.13)	Math IRT q score (BY2XMTH)
Science	44.48 (8.66)	39.46 (7.47)	44.60 (8.31)	50.22 (7.97)	Science IRT q score (BY2XSITH)
History	44.34 (8.94)	38.85 (8.09)	44.47 (8.45)	50.65 (7.92)	History IRT q score (BY2XHTH)
Items contributing to latent measures of parental social capital					
Discuss courses	2.24 (0.69)	2.03 (0.71)	2.25 (0.68)	2.45 (0.64)	Frequency of student-parent discussions on course selection or programs at school (BYS36A)

(continued)

**Table A1 (continued)**

Variable	<i>M (SD)</i>				Description Upper	(NELS:88 label)
	Total	Working Lower	and Middle	Upper		
Discuss activities	2.48 (0.66)	2.26 (0.72)	2.50 (0.64)	2.66 (0.56)	Frequency of student-parent discussions on school activities of particular interest to you (BYS36B)	
Discuss class studies	2.40 (0.69)	2.22 (0.73)	2.40 (0.68)	2.63 (0.58)	Frequency of student-parent discussions on things you've studied in class (BYS36C)	
Discussed program with father	1.05 (0.76)	0.80 (0.75)	1.06 (0.75)	1.34 (0.68)	Frequency of student-father discussions on planning HS program (BYS50A)	
Discussed program with mother	1.41 (0.68)	1.30 (0.72)	1.42 (0.68)	1.53 (0.62)	Frequency of student-mother discussions on planning HS program (BYS50B)	
Parent(s) attended meetings	1.90 (0.93)	2.16 (0.92)	1.90 (0.94)	1.55 (0.82)	Parent(s) attended a school meeting this year (BYS37A)	
Parent(s) visited your class	2.38 (0.90)	2.43 (0.87)	2.37 (0.90)	2.33 (0.92)	Parent(s) visited your class this year (BYS37C)	
Parent(s) attended school event	1.74 (0.95)	2.12 (0.97)	1.71 (0.94)	1.45 (0.83)	Parent(s) attended a school event this year where child participated (BYS37D)	
Parents have adequate say	2.36 (0.73)	2.31 (0.73)	2.39 (0.73)	2.27 (0.73)	Parents have an adequate say in setting school policy (BYP74J)	
Parents work together	2.18 (0.67)	2.17 (0.68)	2.21 (0.67)	2.06 (0.66)	Parents work together in supporting school policy (BYP74K)	
PTA member	1.68 (0.47)	1.89 (0.31)	1.69 (0.46)	1.40 (0.49)	Parents are PTA members (BYP59A)	
Attend PTA	1.64 (0.48)	1.71 (0.45)	1.65 (0.48)	1.53 (0.50)	Parents attend PTA meetings (BYP59B)	
Participate in PTA	1.74 (0.44)	1.87 (0.34)	1.75 (0.43)	1.56 (0.50)	Parents participate in PTA activities (BYP59C)	

*Source.* National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988, eighth grade students and parents surveyed in 1988. Statistics weighted by base-year sample weight/mean base-year sample weight.

*Note.* The following items are reverse coded: BY37A, BY37C, BY37D, BY74J, BY74K, BY59A, BY59B, and BY59C. HS = high school; IRT = item response theory.

Table A2  
Measurement Model Descriptions and Standardized Factor Loadings

Latent Construct and NELS:88 Item Label	Item Description	Factor Loading
Achievement composite	Continuous variables standardized on a 1 scale	
BY2XRTH	Reading IRT q score	.842
BY2XMTH	Math IRT q score	.855
BY2XSSTH	Science IRT q score	.848
BY2XHHTH	History IRT q score	.846
Parents Help Student	3-point ordinal scale (1 = <i>not at all</i> , 2 = <i>once or twice</i> , 3 = <i>three or more times</i> )	
BYS36A	Since the beginning of the school year, how often have you discussed with parents selecting courses or programs at school?	.696
BYS36B	... discussed school activities of particular interest to you?	.648
BYS36C	... discussed things you've studied in class?	.583
BYS50A	... talked to your father about planning your HS program.	.696
BYS50B	... talked to your mother about planning your HS program.	.767
Parents Visit School	Categorical scale (1 = yes, 2 = I don't know 3 = no)	
BYS37A	Since the beginning of this school year your parent(s) attended a school meeting.	.707
BYS37C	... visited your class.	.346
BYS37D	... attended a school event such as a play, concert, sports competition, honor ceremony or science fair where YOU participated.	.654
PTA Involvement	Dichotomous (1 = yes, 2 = no)	
BYP59A	Do you and your spouse/partner belong to a parent-teacher organization at your eighth grader's school?	.854
BYP59B	... attend meetings of a parent-teacher organization?	.772
BYP59C	... take part in the activities of a parent-teacher organization?	.877
Parents Influence School	4-point, Likert-type scale (1 = <i>strongly agree</i> , 4 = <i>strongly disagree</i> )	
BYP74j	Parents have an adequate say in setting school policy.	.776
BYP74K	Parents work together in supporting school policy.	.982

Source. National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988, entire sample of eighth grade students and parents surveyed in 1988 ( $n = 24,241$ ). Statistics weighted by base-year sample weight/mean base-year sample weight.  
 Note. HS = high school, IRT = item response theory.

**Table A3**  
**The Educational Impact of Parental Social Capital by Social Class**

Exogenous Variable	Endogenous Variables Throughout Eighth Grade												Dependent Variables End of Eighth Grade									
	Parents Help Student				Parents Visit School				PTA Involvement				Parents Influence School				Track Placement			Composite Test Scores		
	L	W/M	U		L	W/M	U		L	W/M	U		L	W/M	U		L	W/M	U	L	W/M	U
SES	.13***	.17***	.11***	.08***	.14***	.06*	.11***	.19***	.04	-.07***	.02*	.02	-.09***	.01	.04	.14***	.20***	.13***				
Family composition	.03	.10***	.16***	.01	.13***	.16***	.01	.12***	.12	-.03	.04***	.04	.08***	.00	.01	-.06***	.02**	.10***				
Hispanic	.01	-.01	.00	.14***	.03	-.01	.01	-.03*	-.03	.13***	.04***	.01	.07***	.04***	.05**	-.11***	-.13***	-.11***				
Black	.07***	.01	-.04*	.08**	.04**	.04	.08**	.08***	.09*	.13***	.06***	.04	.24***	.16***	.05*	-.22***	-.24***	-.16***				
Asian	-.02	-.04***	-.05***	.02	-.04***	-.05*	.01	-.02	-.09**	.08***	.06***	.02	.10***	.09***	.05**	.03*	-.01	.01				
Native American	.01	-.04***	-.02	.02	.00	-.00	-.02	.02*	-.03	.04	-.01	-.02	.06**	.03***	.01	-.07***	-.09***	-.08***				
Endogenous variables:																						
parental social capital																						
Parents Help Student	—	—	—	-.34***	.42***	.45***	.06*	.11***	.03	.09***	.04***	.01	.03	.06***	.08	.25***	.23***	.25***				
Parents Visit School	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.09**	.12***	.13*	-.08***	-.03	-.08				
PTA Involvement	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.04	.01	-.01	.03	.03*	.01				
Parents Influence School	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.01	-.04**	-.07**	-.02	.04***	.02				

*Source:* National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, eighth grade students and parents surveyed in 1988. Observations are weighted by base-year sample weight/mean base-year sample weight.

*Note:* Effects marked with dashes are not estimated in the models. The parameters are presented in standard deviation units. Tucker-Lewis index = .94, comparative fit index = .95, root mean square error of approximation = .036. Parameter estimates and standard errors are adjusted for complex sampling design. L = lower class; W/M = working and middle class; U = upper class; SES = socioeconomic status.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>The literature on the "embeddedness" (Polanyi, 1957) of social networks in economic behavior (Granovetter, 1985) contradicts pure market notions of economic action that are founded on perhaps overly optimistic presumptions about open and equitable information exchange (Uzzi, 1996), hence the existence of sanctions against insider trading and nepotistic hiring practices (Ream, 2005).

<sup>2</sup>The potential for social exchange to affect educational inequality may be less discernible than the more obvious role that material resources might play in the stratification process through inequitable school funding schemes (Condrón & Roscigno, 2003). Field research is demystifying the sociological underpinnings of educational stratification, however, and survey research can build upon this work.

<sup>3</sup>Social capital is not a monolithic concept: There are various *forms* of social capital (e.g., trust, closure, norms of reciprocity) that enable the accumulation and exchange of various *kinds* of resources (e.g., tangible goods, knowledge and information, dispositions and powerful ways of acting). Forms of social capital conjure notions of the strength and diversity of social networks, including relationship depth and levels of commitment; the range of one's social "portfolio" across socioeconomic, racial and ethnic, and generational borders; and the informal domains (e.g., family, peer) or more formal domains (e.g., school, community) in which useful relationships are made manifest (McNeal, 1999).

<sup>4</sup>Neo-Marxist notions of reproduction assume that different levels of education regularly correspond to and may also predict different levels reached by laborers within the workforce, so that we can also read the stratified division of labor back upon the internally organized differential experiences of students who are tracked in our education system (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1977).

<sup>5</sup>Among these scholars, Joyce Epstein (2001) is widely cited for her six-part parental involvement framework, which includes informal home-based components as well as more formal school- and community-based elements of parental actions that influence children's schooling.

<sup>6</sup>Psychologists and educational researchers, for example, have carefully documented the positive impact of "authoritative" parenting styles—characterized as warm and involved, yet consistently firm in clarifying and enforcing guidelines and developmentally appropriate expectations—on children's development (Steinberg, 2001), including psychological and social adjustment and students' success in schools (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991; Park & Palardy, 2004).

<sup>7</sup>Illustrating what is functional about social capital, these ethnographers reveal the concerted processes whereby middle-class parents draw on professionals within their interpersonal networks (e.g., lawyers, members of the media) to collectively influence school policy, sometimes converging on a school site en masse in order to effect change. Considering this same account from their more critical perspective, social ties between schools and middle-class parent networks often exclude working poor parents, who may lack the schedule flexibility (Ehrenreich, 2001) necessary for developing cooperative and even politicized alliances (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991) that might otherwise influence school personnel on behalf of *their* children.

<sup>8</sup>Valenzuela (1999) called attention to "subtractive" schooling processes that fragment Latino student networks in a manner that contributes to social *decapitalization*. Stanton-Salazar (2001) showed how relationship development between adolescents and mainstream school personnel can be particularly influential, yet markedly different across racial and ethnic groups, in determining the extent to which students find school to be welcoming or alienating. Other research linking student transience and social capital (Ream, 2005) illuminates inter- and intraethnic aspects of the socialization process that can exacerbate the achievement gap disadvantaging Mexican-origin youth.

<sup>9</sup>This point is partially illustrated in *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, in which Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips (1998) analyzed Black-White earnings as a function of test performance across time. They did so by comparing the Black-White test performance/earnings ratio in 1964 and then again in 1993. Most tellingly, among men who scored above the 50th percentile on the Armed Forces Qualification Test, Black average earnings rose from 65% of White average earnings in 1964 to 96% of White average earnings in 1993 (pp. 4–6).

<sup>10</sup>Diversity in contemporary America has erased some of what were once more obvious markers of social class. Ready access to money via more easily obtainable low-interest lines of credit, for example, has made a multitude of products and services widely available to American consumers. Religious affiliation, voting patterns, and even skin color are much less clearly the class indicators they once were (Scott & Leonhardt, 2005). Yet in spite of the reconfiguration and blending of what were once more distinct class indicators, social class remains a powerful and divisive force (Bowles, Gintis, & Groves, 2005; Ehrenreich, 2001; Phillips, 2002) that bears mightily upon inequalities in schooling in the United States (Berliner, 2005; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Kozol, 2005; Rothstein, 2004). Thus, research addressing social structural position and social class often rejects the notion of inequality in American families as a matter of fine gradations. Instead, broad categorical analyses commonly group families into three more or less distinguishable social class groups: the upper class, the middle and working classes, and the poor (Lamont, 1992; Lareau, 2003; Wright, 1997). For scholars of this mind-set, *the question is not whether class categories faithfully mirror the increasing complexity of the social world but whether these categories are capable of advancing our knowledge of specific problems in class analysis* (Wright, 1997).

<sup>11</sup>The field research that catalyzed this investigation, in particular that of Horvat et al. (2003), considered parent networks by social class at the elementary school level, when parents and school personnel typically have 6 or 7 years to get to know each other. To study parent networks during students' relatively brief sojourn through middle school, we used NELS eighth grade data (rather than first or second follow-up high school data) to investigate the developmental period when early adolescents begin to distance themselves from parents (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Hartup & Stevens 1997; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999).

<sup>12</sup>Because the NELS sampling design resulted in students' being nested in schools, the assumption of the statistical independence of observation was likely violated, which can result in a misestimation of standard errors (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). We used an Mplus command ("complex") to adjust the standard errors and model fit indices to account for cluster sampling (Muthén & Muthén, 2004).

<sup>13</sup>The National Center for Education Statistics oversampled certain subpopulations (e.g., students from certain minority groups) to improve statistical power for analyses focusing on those groups. The data set contains sample weights to correct for oversampling and other aspects of the sampling methodology that prevented the selection of a nationally representative sample of students. We used the base-year sample weight to attain a nationally representative sample of eighth graders.

<sup>14</sup>The National Center for Education Statistics constructed the achievement score using the following procedure. The difficulty of each item on each test was estimated using item response theory. Each student's item responses were then used to estimate his or her achievement level, with correct answers being weighted on the basis of their estimated difficulty. The distribution of each of the four achievement variables was then transformed to a *t* scale standardized on 10th grade scores ( $M = 50$ ,  $SD = 10$ ).

<sup>15</sup>Although all elementary school students are expected to learn the same foundational skills, the transition to middle school and junior high school marks an abrupt change when course sequencing and content differentiation signal the formal tracking and ability grouping that begins in the middle grades (Dauber, Alexander, & Entwisle, 1996). Ample evidence shows that lower track placement often produces deleterious educational effects, especially on low-income students (Gamoran & Berends, 1987; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1991).

<sup>16</sup>The NELS survey instruments are not grounded in social capital theory or any other single basic research agenda, so inadequacies in the survey data inhibit what might have

been a more comprehensive operationalization of parental social capital. Illustratively, neither relations of trust (Hardin, 2002) nor shared expectations and norms (Coleman, 1988) are especially measurable using NELS data.

<sup>17</sup>See Table A2 in the Appendix for item descriptions and factor loadings for the latent constructs.

<sup>18</sup>We also modeled all four forms of parental social capital as simultaneous and correlated predictors of our two outcomes (track placement and test scores); this model fit the data equally well. In Figure 1, we present the more theoretically plausible model, although we leave to future analyses the question of whether some forms of social capital mediate the educational influence of others.

<sup>19</sup>To the degree that many middle schools have moved toward more heterogeneous ability groupings of students and less tracking than is still found in high schools, this finding is not entirely surprising. Moreover, if the forces that buttress tracking are tied to each school community's unique context (Page, 1991; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002), then we can expect significant variation in tracking practices across local settings (Wells & Serna, 1996). It is difficult, however, to find reliable data on the amount and kinds of tracking schools of any type do because schools use tracking practices under different, perhaps even euphemistic, names. And then, too, there is the question of what counts as "tracking"—whether, for example, placement in Title I or vocational education is a form of tracking is subject to varying interpretations.

<sup>20</sup>Previous users of NELS have noted that students gained an average of approximately 2 points per year on the NELS achievement tests (Ream, 2005). Therefore, the average eighth grade student from a low-social-class family is six grade levels behind the average eighth grade student from a high-social-class family.

<sup>21</sup>Membership in any particular social class group is associated with several factors (e.g., family composition, race and ethnicity) that are unaccounted for in Figure 2. Adjusting the results of the analysis of variance for such factors would likely produce smaller mean social class differences in the availability of parental social capital.

<sup>22</sup>Post hoc tests also reveal that all pairwise means differ significantly ( $p < .01$ ), with the exception of Parents Influence School, whose distribution among the lower- and working- and middle-class groups is, on average, statistically equivalent ( $-0.04$  and  $-0.06$  standard deviations, respectively).

<sup>23</sup>For perhaps a clearer understanding of the *magnitude* of the links between variables in the models, the parameter estimates are depicted in standardized units in Table A3 in the Appendix.

<sup>24</sup>Horvat et al. (2003) asserted, "There is good reason to suspect that the forms of parental behavior that we have documented are relevant to student outcomes" (p. 345).

<sup>25</sup>The actual magnitude of the middle-class link between Parents Influence School and eighth grade test scores is rather small, however, as is indicated by the standardized parameter (0.04 standard deviations) in Table A3.

<sup>26</sup>Such strategies entail complex social and interpretive processes that may be more thoroughly captured by field research techniques and then, too, by sophisticated survey designs that build upon ethnographic fieldwork. Coleman (1990) himself asserted in *Foundations of Social Theory* that the conceptual value of social capital "lies primarily in its usefulness for qualitative analyses of social systems and for those quantitative analyses that employ qualitative indicators" (pp. 305–306).

<sup>27</sup>Housing and school resegregation (Orfield & Lee, 2007; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005) may partly explain parental segregation by social class. The impact of segregation on social capital accumulation and exchange has not yet been thoroughly investigated; we hope that future research will address this oversight.

<sup>28</sup>There remains a gap between sophisticated theoretical claims and weak empirical data on social capital (Baron et al., 2000). Several changes in the development of future survey instruments would enable a more thorough and accurate investigation of the availability and also the educational utility of social capital, including instruments that facilitate (a) both direct (person-to-person) and indirect (collective actions and affiliations) measures of various forms of social capital; (b) the examination of social capital across domains, because interaction takes place in informal (e.g., family) and also more formal public social networks (e.g., school); and (c) the longitudinal examination of various forms of social capital, across various domains (Ream, 2005).

<sup>29</sup>Having suggested the wisdom in structural reforms designed to improve the socio-economic prospects of the working poor, and in educational reforms that lead to more substantive social integration among school parents, we also wish to address some caveats and to recognize potential limitations of our research. First, students in the NELS sample attended middle school in 1988; subsequent reform efforts and educational adaptations have since altered students' and parents' schooling experiences as well as the education policy climate. And to the degree that self-selection influences the demographics of parental involvement, the NELS data are not amenable to true experimental research, by the standard of which students would be randomly assigned to different types of parents across social class categories. Moreover, controlling for prior achievement in our models would have improved our effort to isolate the impact of parental networks during the relatively short period of time when NELS students were in eighth grade. Unfortunately, an earlier (prior to eighth grade) achievement measure is not available in the NELS data set. Finally, we acknowledge and support the notion that policy solutions are most wisely undertaken in the context of a cumulative body of findings rather than in response to the results of any single study (McDonnell, 2000).

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