On Improving Achievement of Minority Children: A Conversation with James Comer

You've been remarkably successful in improving schools for low-income, predominantly minority children. How did you do it?

Our program intervenes at the school level rather than the classroom or student level. The idea is to try to change the social system by applying the principles of behavioral and social science.

How do you do that?

A key element is to create a governance and management group that is led by the principal and includes several parents selected by parents; two or three teachers selected by teachers; and a mental health or support team person: a psychologist, social worker, or special education teacher.

This representative group addresses three things we consider critical to changing schools: climate, the academic program, and staff development. They bring together the available data and make a plan for the entire school year. Then they mobilize the resources, carry out their plan, evaluate the outcomes, and so on.

Are there other elements?

Yes, one is the mental health team, which brings together the psychologist, the social worker, and the special education teacher in the building. They sometimes work in the traditional way, focusing on a particular child, trying to provide service to that child's family, and so on, but they also work as a preventive group by trying to make sure that everything the governance and management team does is consistent with current knowledge of child development.
"[The] program made the teaching of basic skills very relevant to the children; it created a very exciting school, and the achievement scores just leaped upward."

What's an example?

We had a child who had been in a classroom for eight months without ever smiling at the teacher. She was suspicious and hostile because she had had bad experiences with adults and felt she couldn't trust them. When the child smiled for the first time, the teacher was just devastated because she realized that in two more months, the child would go on to another classroom and would have to start all over with another adult.

We had a discussion, thought about discontinuity in the lives of many low-income children, and about the number of children who had problems establishing relationships with mature adults on an ongoing basis. Together we came up with the idea of keeping children with the same teacher for two years. We tried it and we had dramatic improvement in the performance of many of the children. There were some who had made no academic gains the first year but who made two years of academic gains the second year.

You've mentioned the governance group and the mental health team. Is there another element to the project?

Yes, parents participate on three levels. We have one parent per classroom, working on a parttime basis. They are paid minimum wage for ten hours of work a week, but each parent gives many more hours of volunteer time. That group of parents forms the core of a parent group because, when they invite two or three other parents to come in, you have 30-40 parents to make up the parent group in the school. That group plans, with teachers, all the assemblies and curricular activities. When we began using this approach, we got a great turnout from parents because the parents themselves were involved in putting the activities together, and they wanted to make them successful.

At the second level of participation, the parents in this parent group select a few of their members to serve on the governance and management group. That's a higher level of responsibility, so they’re careful to select people who can work well with teachers and who have leadership skills. The third level of participation is the general turnout to the activities put on by the parent-teacher group. We went from having 15-20 people show up for activities to having 250 turn out. That increase occurred because the parents felt they had real responsibility and were really making a difference in the school.

And the effects carried over to the students' achievement?

There were a number of important effects. Having the children's own parents, or people like their parents, in the school made a big difference to the academic program. Children would hurry out of their classrooms after classes to show their papers to their parents who were in the school, and they didn't act in troublesome kinds of ways because they wanted to maintain the respect of the parents—as well as of the teachers, because parents and teachers were in agreement; they were working together. There was no way for children, as children will if they can, to play one adult authority figure against another. So we had great improvement—in academic achievement, in social behavior, and in attendance. Martin Luther King, the school we started with, has had the best attendance record in the city—ahead of all the higher socioeconomic schools—for four out of the last five years.

How do you explain that?

When you address the social climate and improve the quality of relationships among parents, teachers, administrators, and students, that reduces distrust and frees the energy that had gone into fighting each other, so that people have more time to concentrate on the academic program, to plan, and simply to manage the school better.

You described this as the intentional application of social science in education. Please say a little more about that.

One aspect of it is conceptualizing the problems of modern schools as contrasted with those of the schools of yesterday, and considering how to modify today's schools so as to support the development of children.

In the pre-1940s, the school was a natural part of the community. If after school you went to the grocery store with your parents, you would bump into your principal or your minister or your teachers. As they exchanged pleasantries and commented on how you were doing in school, you understood that these were people who knew your parents. They and your
parents spoke with a common tongue about what was right or wrong, good or bad, and what they expected of you.

Since World War II, we’ve had high mobility. With mass communication, especially TV, children see and hear events from around the world all the time. Every half hour you can listen to the news and hear differences of opinion. Teachers live far from school, so there’s both social and physical distance between them and the children they serve.

Often struggles that develop in society—between blacks and whites, or between people in middle and low income groups—create potential difficulties between home and school. Very often parents don’t back up school people in the same way they did when the school was a natural part of the community. But schools continue to operate in the hierarchical authoritarian way they did in the past, ignoring the distrust and alienation between home and school. Children will act up in that kind of environment because there’s confusion, and there are fewer authority figures influencing their behavior just when they need more of them. That’s what I mean by understanding how social conditions affect behavior.

So understanding these conditions, we created the governance and management group I mentioned earlier, which brought parents, administrators, and teachers together in order to recreate a consensus about what was right and wrong, good and bad, and what everyone wanted the school to accomplish.

And both these things—understanding the social situation and designing a suitable response—are what you mean by the application of social science. Does your experience suggest that other schools may need to rethink these matters?

I think that many social systems serving children—recreational, even religious, institutions—must reexamine what they’re trying to accomplish in the light of what we know about how children learn. School, for example, is not only about academic achievement; we are preparing young people so they can hold jobs, live in families, serve as heads of households, find satisfaction and meaning in life, and be responsible citizens. You don’t get all of that by simply focusing on academic content.

But across the country there is almost exclusive emphasis these days on academics.

And I’m greatly concerned about that, because most of the so-called reformers don’t understand how people learn. They think of learning as a mechanical process; they don’t seem to understand how much it depends on imitation, on identification with authority figures, on internalization of attitudes and values through relating emotionally to others. They do not give enough attention to the kind of climate that must be created to make that possible.

And the time and care it takes to build it.

Absolutely. When we went into King and Baldwin schools, they were 32nd and 33rd out of 33 in achievement. They had the most chaotic school climates you can imagine, with fighting, poor attendance, disrespect for authority, high turnover of staff—all the conditions you often find in such places—and all of that had to be turned around gradually.

What was your role in doing that?

Well, to help people understand the social system and to work out ways to change it.

Specifically how did you go about doing that?

The first year I spent a great deal of time in the building myself, dealing with immediate, hands-on problems along with the staff. I learned about the school, but it was important that I not be there so much, because that was a model that couldn’t be replicated. So in the second year, our social worker became the person on the spot, and I became the conceptualizer, working with the social worker, the teachers, and the principal to plan the kinds of things that needed to be done. I was also the liaison to downtown. I put on a number of workshops in the behavioral sciences and child development, and I helped with the mental health team in particular, taking referrals on children with problems.

In responding to those referrals, we were able to convey a way of thinking about children and their problems: rather than thinking of them as bad children or children who weren’t so smart, it was more helpful to think of them as underdeveloped, or as having developed ways of managing themselves that were troublesome to the system. We took the attitude that because they were underdeveloped, they could be given skills that would enable them to be successful.

We started out with individual teachers presenting children with problems and our mental health team responding to them. Teachers found it so helpful they began dropping in on the meetings even when they hadn’t referred any of the children being discussed. After awhile we said, “Why not make this a workshop or a seminar?” They agreed, so they all started coming. We would go over what had happened, what the behavior meant, and what the teacher might do to address it. Other teachers would share their ideas about how they had handled similar problems.

How did you become involved in this project in the first place?

We were asked by the Ford Foundation. Our Center had been doing consultation in the schools on a parttime basis. The Ford people suggested that it might be more useful if we were there fulltime and if we had equal responsibility with the school for the outcomes of our suggestions.
Initially, our Center had been brought in by a progressive superintendent, but it was a very chaotic time—1968, when there was a lot of social unrest—so the superintendent left after the first year. The new superintendent was interested but caught up in his own problems and couldn't work with us. The third superintendent had much the same problems but was less supportive of our ideas and ways of working; he was a very dedicated man, but he wanted to make it happen right away. So we didn't get very much support during those first five years. We were able to bring about a change in the climate of the school, but we couldn't show academic gains. We hung on for a couple of more years and then started to leave, but the parents objected, so we decided to stay.

Then we got support for a program called "Social Skills Curriculum for Inner-City Children," because it was clear to us that helping the children develop good social skills reduced stress in the schools and made it possible for teachers and others to plan. So we decided to continue the effort to teach social skills in an even more systematic way.

We asked the parents, "What do you want for your children as adults?" Then we asked, "What do you think are the kinds of skills your children will need?" They came up with ideas in several categories: politics and government, business and economics, health and nutrition, spiritual and leisure time. So we worked out programs that integrated the teaching of academic skills, appreciation of the arts, and specific social skills.

Well, that program made the teaching of basic skills very relevant to the children. It created a very exciting school, and the achievement scores just leaped upward.

Some educators say it's a mistake to bring parents—especially low-income parents—in on school governance; that instead we should concentrate on getting parents to play a more direct role in the day-to-day learning of their own children—and that's enough.

It's not a mistake if you prepare the parents, if you genuinely respect them and assist them to participate constructively, and if you tap their strengths rather than their weaknesses. If we had taken low-income parents and tried to use them in the academic support area, they would have felt inadequate, defensive, and rebellious, and that would have created problems. But because we used them in the social support area, they felt they were doing something that was worthwhile and useful.

And many of them gained confidence from being in the school; in fact, at least seven of the parents we know of went back and finished high school, went on to college, and became professional people themselves. One got a master's degree; her daughter, who just finished at Yale University last year, is now in medical school.

You said the curriculum emphasized instruction in social skills. What is that like?

Well, for example, at the time we initiated a unit on politics and government, there was a mayoral contest going on in the city. The children wrote letters asking the candidates to make presentations to them and their parents. The children were taught how to be hosts for the candidates and their parents, and how to raise questions with the candidates so as to put them on the spot without being disrespectful. After the presentations the children wrote thank you letters as part of their language arts. Parents and teachers rented a bus and took the children around town to show them conditions. They discussed relationships between those conditions and politics and government, and the children came back and wrote about it for their language arts and social science lessons. To develop appreciation for the arts, the children put on a dance and drama program for their parents and the candidates.

That's a very broad interpretation of social skills. I thought it might just mean saying "please" and "thank you."

Well, it's that also, but these were more ambitious and more important social skills.

What about other aspects of the academic program?

After the climate of the school changed dramatically, there was more time and energy to identify problems and needs, and to plan. We changed the testing program so we could get the test scores back in time to identify weak areas and then have staff development for teachers to help them develop the skills necessary to improve in those areas. Teachers would identify weaknesses of the children and areas where they themselves needed more work, and we would base our staff development on our building-level goals rather than on ideas from downtown.

Your experience is certainly consistent with the principle that the individual school should be the base for school improvement activities.

Right. It's very difficult to transfer practices from one school to another because people are different, circumstances are different. Also the sense of empowerment that comes from looking at the problems of your own school and making adjustments for yourself is very important to bringing about change and improvement.

How do these ideas relate to the effective schools work of Ronald Edmonds and others?

Well, Ron and I were good friends, but we had a continuing debate. Ron believed that our approach—a comprehensive strategy that paid attention to relationship issues—was really the...
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What's the current status of your project in New Haven?
It's now been mandated in 12 of the lowest achieving elementary schools, and we're working with the central administration to help those schools use our model.

A final word?
I might just add that achievement of low-income and minority children is tremendously important. A lot of people seem to think it's going to be possible to close low-income people out of the mainstream, as we did in the past, that they'll have low-level jobs, and so on. It's just not going to happen. There was a time when you could have stability in society even though many people weren't well educated, because they could go take low-level jobs in the steel mills, or a variety of other blue-collar positions, and support a family, feel good about themselves, and be good citizens as a result. Today, in order to get even the low-level service job, you need good social skills. You need to be able to interact appropriately with people in a variety of settings.

Do you see any dangers in the possible misuse of the effective schools literature?
Yes, I do—and he was concerned about that. But I think more people are beginning to understand that what he was talking about were end products, and there's a process you must go through to reach them; you can't create them instantly out of nothing. You can't demand that people have high expectations; you've got to develop a climate that allows people to have high expectations. The same teachers in our schools who, working in chaotic conditions, had low expectations for children developed high expectations when they were working in a desirable and supportive climate—and even if you start with high expectations, you can't sustain them in chaos.