Hannum and Fuller (2006) explore the impact schooling has on the mobility of children in our society. They deduce that while schools have a critically important influence on the social mobility of our young people, the role of context, particularly families and communities, must not be forsaken in critiquing the many influential factors that impact social mobility of children. As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise our children. Hannum and Fuller (2006) argue that in order to better understand how schooling truly contributes to the mobility of children, there needs to be greater attention to the role of our children’s wider social context and the values, habits of mind, and socio-emotional support that they possess when they enter and pass through our schools.

Since its inception, American society has promoted and, for the most part, realized the notion of progress. Our nation’s ethos has been one of advancement; there is a belief that each generation will advance society and leave a country in which our children can lead better lives than our own. Hannum and Fuller (2006) believe this trust in the possibility of upward mobility for future generations drives movements of families from literally around the world. In fact, it drives the spirit of capitalism that defines the majority of nation-states in the world. Hannum and Fuller (2006) emphasize that the notion of mass access to educational opportunity is a key element fueling the dream of, and desire for, upward mobility. As a result, nations commit huge public investment in schools, whether developed, underdeveloped or even undeveloped in their
global interdependent economies, to signify their place in modern society and the commitment to advancement.

Sociological research has spent a great deal of time in recent decades investigating the nature of educational institutions vis-à-vis the uneven effects on the progress of families, societies and the global, interconnected community. There does not appear, however, to be a great amount of comparative research linking schooling and the other significant contexts associated with childhood, namely families and communities. Hannum and Fuller (2006) explore the many contexts in which children operate and how these contexts shape school experiences and, more importantly, outcomes for the next generation of adults. In reflecting on Hannum and Fuller’s research, it is critically clear that modern nation-states, such as the United States, must continue to invest not just in schooling but also in supporting the social contexts of the students we serve. Investment must be made in families and communities that have a direct impact in shaping, for better or worse, our students’ experiences and learning connected to school.

Turning to address a cornerstone question of school reform, how does schooling really contribute to the mobility of children? And, furthermore, what impact does a student’s broader social context have on their schooling? Specifically, how influential can families and communities be on the socio-emotional, academic and intellectual growth our students face during their formative years?

Hannum and Fuller (2006) are correct in articulating an opinion that social context does matter in the formal learning process nurtured by schools and, therefore, impacts the socio-economic mobility of our children. It would be irresponsible to ignore social context and how it
might equally foster and decay the myriad learning paradigm created within our schools.

Students can flourish, flounder and flat-line based on the dynamics of their personal social context as it applies to their schooling. Common sense would tell us that the more scaffolding and support provided by a child’s social context, the greater the chances of success for that particular student in their educational institution. Once again, it takes a village of ingredients to mix the ideal recipe for educational success. Each student’s recipe, however, is unique and must be understood in terms of needs and support.

As a practitioner and educational leader over the past two decades, my understanding of the needs of learners continues to expand and be re-defined. Taking into account the individual’s meanings, perceptions, understandings, thoughts, feelings, and adaptation strategies, while balancing these definers of self with the norms, values, beliefs, expectations, and actions of one’s family, community, peers, and school provides a rich context for the role of culture as central to the development of being and, thus, learning (Phelan, Davidson & Yu, 1998).

Learning does not take place in a vacuum. It is a complex, unavoidable biological and socio-developmental process that calls upon input from both nature and nurture. When one thinks about the overall complexity of this process for any individual learner, one cannot help but understand that any one-size fits all approach is doomed for failure. Learners must be viewed as unique individuals that require personalized approaches and understandings that are relationship-driven. These relationships will allow for recognition of an individual student’s social context and what, if anything, needs to be adjusted in order to better nurture the ideal teaching-learning environment for a particular student.
Social capital is one way in which families and communities can support young people outside their schools yet provide a positive impact on a student’s schooling. Hanifan (1916) describes social capital as, “the daily lives of a people, namely, goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy and social intercourse among a group of individuals and families who make up a social unit” (p. 130). As students gain a greater sense of self-worth due to the collective power of social capital from both family and community, improvements in learning and living are possible. And with the accumulation of social capital, constructive community work can transcend to schooling.

Emphasizing the power of communities and neighborhoods on our youth, Small (2004a), states that, “sustaining community participation over time on a collective scale requires a justification rooted in how residents perceive their neighborhood” (p. 5). Small purports that structural support for community participation in the lives of its children comes from incredible community organization, a high level of residential stability, and school neighborhood designs that encourage social interaction among all citizens, young and old (Small, 2004a).

Families and defined communities of citizens need to embrace the roles of youth development and the building of social capital offerings for their children. In fact, it needs to be a source of familial and civic pride for both families and communities, respectively. There needs to be a commitment to forwarding the value of (and access to) education, to (inter)connect the populous whenever possible, to engage in the socio-political happenings of both community and society, and to commit to raising children in pursuit of the common good. Families and communities must actively pursue initiatives and programs that build social capital and create what they believe to be ideal social contexts to support student learning in their schools. Schools, in essence, must become extensions of the rich learning environments children
experience in both their homes and communities. It cannot be the other way around, and it has for far too long in many segments of American society.
References


