


Spring 5-16-2014

# Learning Together: A Case Study of a Cooperative School's Approach to Education

Ariana M. Ali  
arianamali09@gmail.com

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University of San Francisco

**Learning Together:  
A Case Study of a Cooperative School's Approach to Education**

A Thesis Presented to  
The Faculty of the School Education  
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in International and Multicultural Education

by Ariana Ali  
May 2014

# **Learning Together: A Case Study of a Cooperative School's Approach to Education**

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

in

INTERNATIONAL AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

by Ariana Ali

May 2014

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this thesis has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

Approved:

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Instructor/Chairperson

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Date

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to offer a huge thank you to my family and to Pacific Cooperative School for all the support and patience that went into this project. I would also like to thank the faculty and my fellow students from the International and Multicultural Education program at the University of San Francisco. I have learned a great deal from all of you and my mind has been transformed and enriched in ways I never could have imagined.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is based on an in-depth case study of one cooperative pre-preschool and preschool in San Francisco. Qualitative research methods, such as observation and one-on-one interviews, were used to study the structure, culture, and community at the school. Cooperative schools have not been well researched or documented in academic literature and this study hoped to shed some light on this model of school organization. The parent-initiated and community-oriented nature of cooperative schools make them stand out as unique among the large, bureaucratically-run schools and daycares typically found in the United States. The results of this study highlighted four themes important within the cooperative school, which emerged through interviews and observations and these include: community, parent education, the parent-teacher relationship, and implementing high quality early childhood education.

## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

### **Statement of the Problem**

Before jumping into an explanation of the problem, I would like to first begin by explaining why I chose to engage in a case study of a cooperative school. This process began as a personal journey some years ago when I heard an interview with and later read the works of John Taylor Gatto, a New York City public school teacher who had an unorthodox way of teaching. He described, what was for me, was a completely new way of understanding the role of schooling and education. Gatto did not talk about academic success, test scores, or attending the best universities—what I had long been taught was the true mark of success—but instead, he emphasized the socialization process that happens within schools and the resulting disconnection that often occurs between young students, families, and local communities. He spoke of the need for a “curriculum of the family” where “a community’s places, people, procedures, and problems can become living textbooks” (Gatto, 2002, p. 19). What he described was the need for an integrated, holistic model of education whereby students are not seen as disconnected or isolated individuals when they walk through the doors of a school, but they are seen as people who are deeply rooted in their local context. To be brief, Gatto opened my mind to the possibility of something different.

This led me down a long path of thinking about and attempting to re-imagine a school system in which the whole child, as well as their family, is acknowledged and respected. Although there are many ideas and alternative schools models that have attempted to answer this question, I have found the cooperative school model particularly intriguing and promising. My



involvement with a cooperative nursery and preschool with my son for the past two years helped me to understand the benefits and challenges that come with running a democratically-organized and community-oriented school that relies more on the contributions of parents than on staff. It is a model of schooling that is little known or studied, especially because it was developed by mothers rather than by professional educators. However, it is a model of schooling that deserves more attention than it receives because it acknowledges the deep connection between a child and his or her parents and the need to educate both, not solely the child.

Integral to the cooperative school model is the systematic involvement of parents in the school, which addresses one of the major problems faced by many schools today: How can more parents be encouraged to be more involved in the school? Goldkind and Farmer (2013) state, “Parental involvement in schools continues to be a critical issue for the stakeholders of the nation’s education system” (p. 223). Research has demonstrated that increased parent involvement leads to a host of improved outcomes, not only for students but for parents as well (Goldkind & Farmer, 2013; International Labour Organization, 2012; Shepard & Rose, 1995). Despite this, few schools have made serious changes in order to create an environment that is more welcoming and inclusive of parents. In general, parents are seen as outsiders who can play a small but supportive role to the education experts—teachers and school staff. Pushor (2012) explains there is a common pattern of “privileging of teacher knowledge and judgment over knowledge that resides in parents and families” (p. 467). As a result, rather than turning to parents as a vital resource, many schools instead push parents out, especially if there is a feeling that they are not on board with the school’s agenda. Of course, teachers and school staff do play an integral role in a child’s education. However, the learning students engage in in schools goes

hand-in-hand with the education they receive in their homes, communities, and neighborhoods. The problem that must be addressed is how to create a school model where parental involvement is integrated into the overall school structure, one where a strong and reciprocal relationship between the home and school environment is established in order to create both stronger schools and stronger families.

### **Background and Need for the Study**

The primary need for this study stems from cooperative school models often being overlooked by academics, policymakers, and others in the education sector (Coontz, 1996; Fenby, 1970). Because cooperative schools often begin through the efforts of parents, they are erroneously considered simply a parent initiative. Although cooperative schools may not be a practical choice for all families, it is important for parents to be aware of multiple options for their child's education. If they do not know about the cooperative school model, then they will have fewer school options to choose from. Most importantly, cooperative schools are usually focused on the early childhood years, a critical time in a person's life. The first five years of a child's life are significant because cognitive, emotional, and physical development takes place at a rapid rate, and a child's ability to form social relationships is being established (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, United Nations Children's Fund, & Bernard van Leer Foundation 2006). While getting parents involved in their child's education is an important part of a child's school experience, what must also be recognized is that education takes place outside of schools as well.

Within the school system in the United States, there is a tendency to think in terms of a dichotomy: You are either in school where learning takes place or you are not in school and

therefore not learning. What this type of thinking leads to is a diminution of the role of the family in the learning process, especially in terms of what happens during the early childhood years. The International Labour Organization (2012) explains, “Learning begins before a child first walks into a classroom, and so can lifetime advantages and disadvantages” (p. 5), and “Parents (typically mothers) and community members are an important feature of early childhood programmes” (p. 2). However, despite the above evidence that involving parents and the child’s local community in their education process is a way to improve and strengthen the learning process, these two crucial factors are often overlooked in the schooling process.

A current trend that can be found within schools today, and society in general, is the reliance on outside, expert knowledge rather than on an individual’s (in this case mother, father, or caretaker) knowledge and life experiences. In many cases, the school is established as the expert on a child’s learning and parents are expected to listen and follow guidelines established by school personnel. Pushor (2012) explains,

Because the school sets the agenda, educators determine what roles parents are to play within that agenda. The hierarchical structure of educators as experts, acting in the best interests of less-knowing parents, is maintained. With parent involvement, the focus is placed on what parents can do to help the school realize its intended outcomes for children, not on what the parents’ hopes, dreams, or intentions for their children may be or on what the school can do to help parents realize their personal or family agendas. (p. 467)

Although parents have an intimate knowledge of their child’s personality, skills, emotions, etc., this form of knowing is largely devalued within the standard school structure in the U.S., where parents are considered to be on the outside of the learning process. Oostdam and Hooge (2013) explain, “Apart from pupils, parents are the most important target group for schools to communicate with. However, in general, teachers and schools appear not very well prepared for

this” and that “rather than adopting an open approach, teachers tend to tell parents what they should do or keep them at a safe distance” (pp. 345, 337). Many schools claim they want increased parent involvement, but the structure and culture of the schools tends to leave parents on the outside, without many opportunities for meaningful involvement. The cooperative school model challenges this way of thinking by creating a school where not only do parents volunteer, but they collaboratively run the school with teachers and school staff.

Another issue that impacts the schooling and learning process is the isolation of many families, especially new parents with young children, who in many cases do not have family or close friends nearby to help support them in raising their children. U.S. culture, while often praising the importance and value of children, in many ways creates an environment where children are not widely accepted in many social or public situations. In addition, while in the past extended families often lived together, today the living situation for many families looks very different, whether it’s a nuclear family, a single parent, or some other configuration. Families and parenting has certainly changed over the years and while there have been many positive steps forward, some of these changes have also put increased pressure on parents who cannot always rely on local family or friends for support, thereby creating a more stressful and intensive parenting situation, especially during infancy and early childhood. Hager (2011) explains, “in the past, women were not left alone. People lived in houses with large extended families, relatives who visited for months, workers, apprentices, and others. Then, motherhood, as well as fatherhood and childhood, were defined socially and not biologically. Mothering could also be done by women who hadn’t given birth but who fulfilled the tasks of motherhood” (p. 42). This gradually changed during the mid-nineteenth century, and while it may have helped with

overcrowding in many living situations, it has also lead to feelings of isolation and/or alienation for many families, especially for new mothers (Hager, 2011, p. 42). Given that the early childhood years have been found to play an extremely critical role in the trajectory of a child's life (International Labour Organization, 2012), finding a way to reach out to new parents and create a supportive community where both the parents' and the child's needs can be met seems a pressing problem that should addressed.

Additionally, cost is a major factor when it comes to childcare and preschools. The cost of daycare or a preschool can be extremely high for many families. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states that spending ten percent of a family's income on childcare (for children under five years old) would be considered affordable care. However, in most states across the country families are required to spend significantly more on childcare, often making it one of the highest expenses in a family's budget (Child Care Aware of America, 2013, pp. 13-14). Despite the high and increasing costs for high quality early childhood care and programs, making them unattainable for many families, most young children and families would benefit from some sort of educational experience before children enter a formal school setting in kindergarten (Child Care Aware of America, 2013, p. 10). The cooperative school tackles the issue of the high cost of childcare by relying on parents to volunteer some of their time to offset the costs of the school. This means there are often few staff members at cooperative schools and instead most of the work is shared by the families who are members of the cooperative. Coontz (1996) explains, "With today's lean economic conditions and concern about families, one would think that the rich history of proven effectiveness of preschool cooperatives would make them a hot topic. Instead they are probably one of today's best kept secrets" (p. 1). In sum, cooperative

schools address many of the key problems faced by schools today, especially in the early childhood years, and help to establish a positive relationship between parents and schools for the duration of their children's schooling experience.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to conduct a case study of one cooperative school located in San Francisco. The goal was to understand how a cooperative school functions and what benefits this school model provides for parents and the children who attend. Central to this study was attempting to understand the role of community within the organization, as well as how to create a school structure that incorporates parent involvement as a central tenet of the school itself. A goal for this study was to demonstrate the benefits and the replicability of the cooperative school model. Cooperative schools are not very widespread or well-known, but as I hope to demonstrate, many cooperative schools began as parent initiatives that were able to utilize resources within the community, such as churches or community centers and cafes, to help get established as a non-profit organization. The purpose is to show that the cooperative school is based on local needs and efforts and can therefore be set-up in any neighborhood, regardless of geographic location or socio-economic position.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by three specific research questions. The research questions were:

1. What is a cooperative school?
2. How is a cooperative school organized and run?
3. What benefits and challenges arise from this school model?

## Theoretical Framework

This study was partly based on the work of John Dewey, a well-known 20<sup>th</sup> century theorist on education and a progressive advocate on the need for school reform. Although Dewey is most widely known for discussing the need for children to gain experiential knowledge rather than solely relying on book knowledge, he also wrote about many other aspects of the school experience. An important point he made that connects to this study is the need to create a sense of coherence within the learning process for students. Dewey (2001) explains, “The unity and wholeness of the child’s development can be realized only in a corresponding unity and continuity of school conditions. Anything that breaks the latter up into fractions, into isolated parts, must have the same influence upon the educative growth of the child” (p. 395). When different subjects are disconnected from each other, when life experience is disconnected from learning, when the family is pushed out of the schooling process, then the educational experience for children can suffer. Learning does not take place in certain blocks of time or only within a certain building—it happens all the time and connecting these disparate parts can create a more unifying, coherent learning experience for children.

This study was also based on the philosophical theory on caring written by Nel Noddings, who takes a feminine approach to understanding relationships, ethics, and education. Noddings explains that the philosophical field is filled with a male approach to morality and education, which focuses on the abstract and theoretical. Noddings (2003) argues that a feminine approach to morality takes a more concrete path, with a focus on reciprocal relationships and the natural desire to care for others (para. 1-2). She uses the example of a mother and her child as a concrete example of the caring relationship that exists between people, but this example is especially used

to demonstrate the ways in which mothers care and think about others. She describes how women and mothers put love and caring at the center of morality and ethics and that this is the primary way in which women and mothers teach their and other children rather than relying on abstract rules and guides (Chapter 2, “Women and Caring,” para. 8 and 11). Noddings purpose is not to say that only mothers or women can care or teach ethics, but to show that there are different ways to approach our understanding of how we teach these fundamental aspects of life to children. It is not only through the abstract but through the caring relationship itself. Like Dewey, she also rejects the compartmentalization of education. She describes education as a “community-wide enterprise” that involves different aspects of one’s life (Chapter 8, para. 1). Much of her work relates to the philosophy and structure of cooperative schools, which emphasize the role that loving, supportive parents play in their children’s learning and growth.

### **Methodology**

This case study involved examining a cooperative school in San Francisco. The school will subsequently be referred to as Pacific Cooperative School. A case study is “a qualitative research approach to conducting research on a unit of study or bounded system” (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012, p. 14). A case study is a research method used to cover the design, data collection, and data analysis of one particular research site. The goal of using a qualitative research technique for this project was to understand the experiences of those involved in Pacific Cooperative. Qualitative research is used to “provide an understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants” and “the researcher strives to describe the meaning of the findings from the perspective of the research participants” (p. 16). Qualitative research allows participants to speak for themselves, to share their knowledge and



experiences to the researcher who then attempts to share these findings without imposing his or her own assumptions and bias on the data.

Using a case study for this research enabled participants to give an in-depth picture of Pacific Cooperative for readers. Schools, like any institution, contain many layers of meaning and the qualitative research used for this project will, through the use of interviews and observation, enable the researcher to draw a broad picture and form a deep understanding of the research site. As Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2012) explain regarding qualitative research, “To achieve the detailed understandings they seek, qualitative researchers must undertake sustained in-depth, in-context research that allows them to uncover subtle, less overt, personal understandings” (p. 12). Qualitative research is the research method that will be used to paint an in-depth and personal account of the school’s structure, as well as the overall school culture at Pacific Cooperative School.

For this study, the researcher submitted a proposal to the Institutional Review Board at the University of San Francisco to ensure that the study followed proper procedures to protect the safety and privacy of the human subjects involved. Subsequent to receiving a research exemption from the Institutional Review Board, a consent form was then submitted to and signed by the director of Pacific Cooperative granting permission for the research study to take place on the school’s campus. The names of the school as well as those interviewed for this study have been changed in order to protect their, as well as the students, privacy.

### **Setting**

The setting for this study was Pacific Cooperative School, a pre-preschool and preschool that admits children ages one to five years old. The school is a small, white building located near

a large Greek Orthodox Church and parking lot. During pick-up and drop-off times, the school is usually bustling with parents and young children as everyone gets ready for the day—parents greeting each other as they arrive, taking children to wash hands in the bathroom, parents setting up outside toys, and children already running around and playing with various toys and activities. With young children around it seems the energy level is always high, with children ramped up for the day and with parents doing their best to keep up with them.

Pacific Cooperative uses a child-centered, play-based curriculum that is most appropriate for such a young age group. Parents work in the classroom alongside a professional teacher or teachers, as well as taking care of other tasks such as regularly providing snacks for the children in the classroom, helping with cleaning, attending monthly parent meetings, and holding a “co-op job” at the school that involves a specific task such as participating on the Board of Directors, organizing a classroom calendar for parents, giving informational tours to families interested in joining to cooperative school, and so on. The school tries to create an equitable distribution of work across families so that everyone is equally contributing to the quality and effective functioning of the school.

### **Sample & Data Collection**

This study relied on observation at the school, in classrooms and at parent meetings, as well as one-on-one interviews with the director of the school, a classroom teacher, and a parent. The names of those who participated in the interviews have been changed in order to protect their privacy. I set up interviews with each of these individuals at Pacific Cooperative to get a sense of the cooperative experience from different perspectives. By interviewing people who play different roles within the cooperative school, it is hoped that a broad and nuanced

understanding of the cooperative school will be conveyed. The interviews relied on a semi-structured method. Although I went into the interviews with a series of questions, I allowed the interviewees to direct the conversation and used follow-up questions based on their interests and answers rather than solely sticking to predetermined questions.

Observations took place at the school during regular pick-up and drop-off times, during my regular working shifts in the classroom, in conversations with other parents, and during monthly parent meetings held in the evening at Pacific Cooperative. Both the interviews and observations, as well as my firsthand experience as a parent with a child in the cooperative, helped to form a clear picture of Pacific Cooperative.

### **Data Analysis**

Observations done at the school were recorded in detailed notes, which were later used as a reference to better understand different parents' experiences at the school. The three interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. The audio recordings of the interviews were then listened to and transcribed. I read through the transcriptions a number of times and then color-coded quotes from the interviews based on common themes that arose among the participants that were interviewed. These themes are discussed below in the results section of this study. The analysis of the observations and interviews was intended to answer the research questions as well as to give an in-depth look at the particular culture and community that has developed at Pacific Cooperative.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The main limitation of this study is it involved a small sample size, which makes it difficult to generalize on a larger scale. However, qualitative research at Pacific Cooperative

School allowed for uncovering the complexity of the research site to achieve more in-depth understanding of the overall functioning and life at a cooperative school. Another limitation may be that this study is conducted in San Francisco, a liberal, wealthy, urban center, which is somewhat unique compared to the United States as a whole. San Francisco's attributes might contribute to a greater likelihood or interest in the development of alternative school structures, such as cooperative schools, and so ideas generated here may not be easily replicated in other parts of the country. However, this does not mean that the research done for this project will not offer valuable information on the wide variety of possibilities available to educate students.

### **Significance of the Study**

The goal of this study was to show the possibilities and potential that lies within the cooperative school model. A particular model of schooling has developed in the U.S., which has subsequently been adopted by many other countries, and this model has become the predominant method for educating children and youth, despite the fact that many flaws have become apparent. There are other ways to organize a school and educate children, if only we look for them and be willing to give them a try. Looking outside the standard school organizational structure can offer many ideas and solutions toward creating schools that take a more holistic, integrated approach toward educating children and families. This study will demonstrate that cooperative schools show great potential for a new way of educating children, especially in their early years.

## CHAPTER II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to better understand cooperative schools. The goal of this study is to understand how cooperative schools are organized and run, as well as what benefits and challenges arise from this model of schooling. This literature review is divided into several sections based on key themes that emerged related to cooperative schools. The sections of the literature review include: “What is a Cooperative School?,” a basic description about what cooperative schools are and how they are organized; “Creating Community,” which discusses the importance of creating a sense of community at a school; “Parent Involvement,” a look at research that has demonstrated the need for and positive effect that parent involvement has on schools, students, and parents; and “Empowerment Model vs Deficit Model,” which describes the difference between how teachers and schools interact with parents that can create either positive or negative thinking and behavior on the part of parents in their interactions with the school.

Cooperative schools are based on the premise that what’s best for children is to have a strong and positive relationship with their parents and that this is where the foundation of education begins. Parent involvement is not only about sporadic volunteering or attendance at school events but about creating a more integrated, holistic model of school. McKenna and Millen (2013) make clear that, “Central to the philosophy of parent engagement is the understanding of parents as a child’s first and best teacher” (p. 13). Parents are not simply on the sidelines of their child’s education but should play an active role in it, and by creating a school

structure that places parent education on an equal playing field with children's education, a healthier learning environment for the entire family can be created. Pushor (2012) says the "possibility exists to create a new story of school . . . It is possible to imagine a landscape on which educators and parents are positioned, as they lay their knowledge alongside one another in the schooling and education of children to support and enhance learning outcomes and to strengthen parents, families, schools, and communities" (p. 477). Education is not just about having a great school but also about recognizing that learning continues outside of school walls, in the home and in the community, and that all these aspects of a child's life should be integrated in the child's learning experience. Cooperative schools recognize the importance of active parent involvement in a child's education, especially during a child's earliest years, and so base the school model on the need to integrate a parent's love and care for their child into the school experience, as well as their own learning and growth as a parent, into their child's first school experience.

### **What is a Cooperative School?**

A cooperative organization is "owned by and operated for the benefit of those using its services" (U.S. Small Business Administration, n.d.). The hallmark of cooperatives is their democratic structure. Each member of the cooperative has a vote in matters related to the business or organization, regardless of their level of investment in the organization. In this way, an individual or handful of people can't dominate the decisions or directions of the business. Other common aspects of cooperative organizations include voluntary and open membership, autonomy (they operate outside of government control), ongoing education and training for cooperative members, and an outward-looking perspective that takes the needs of the wider

community into account (Coontz, 2003, p. 12). While cooperatives are fairly uncommon in the United States, it is a method of organizing a business or other entity that can be found around the world.

Similar to cooperative businesses and other cooperatively-organized associations, a cooperative school is an organization in which parents (or in some cases teachers) share responsibility for running the school. In cooperative schools, which are also sometimes referred to as parent participation schools, the focus is on creating a school in which parents make the decisions and take care of the daily operations of running the school. Essentially this means structured or institutionalized parent involvement. Coontz (2003) explains that parent cooperatives are parent-governed, non-profit organizations where parents play a role in the school's governance, classrooms, fundraising, and other activities (p. 1). Cooperative schools create a structure and culture in which both children and parents learn side-by-side. Involvement in the classroom helps parents to create a supportive network, with both teachers and other parents, where they can learn about child development, parenting and discipline strategies, as well as create friendships with other families with children of similar ages while their children learn and play together (p. 7). Both parents and children in turn bring their new knowledge into the home with them, creating a strong connection between the education taking place in the school and at home.

Although cooperative schools in the U.S. have had a fairly long history, they are often unknown to the general public. The first cooperative nursery school in the U.S. was established in 1916 in Chicago. Twelve mothers, who were the wives of faculty at the University of Chicago, wanted a space where their young children could socialize and learn together, where they could

get some parenting tips and understanding of child development, as well as desiring some child-free time for themselves in order to volunteer with the Red Cross (Coontz, 1996, p. 2). And so the idea of sharing childcare responsibilities, as well as integrating parent education into the school model, was born. Over the next few years parent participation preschools cropped up in states across the country, becoming especially popular in California. In 1948 California established the first statewide parent cooperative council, and many other states also formed local, regional, or statewide councils in an effort to aid communication and support among cooperative schools.

Cooperative schools, similar to many other cooperative-owned businesses, make an effort to support one another. For example, in San Francisco there is an organization called the “San Francisco Council of Parent Participation Nursery Schools” to which sixteen cooperative nursery and preschools in San Francisco belong. The SFCCPPNS website describes their organization:

Delegates from each school meet monthly to share ideas and to discuss common problems, solutions, and goals. SFCPPNS works to support San Francisco co-ops and co-op members (both current and alumni) in a number of ways. It established and subsidizes a consultant counseling service for parents, guardians, and their children; it hosts a number of workshops and speakers for co-op members each year; and in 2003 it created OASIS, an organizational support system for individual co-operative nursery schools. (<http://www.sfcoopcouncil.org>)

In this way an individual cooperative school is not isolated but has information and resources it can rely on through other cooperative schools in the local region. The goal is not only to run high-quality preschools for young children but also to create a positive and supportive community for parents that attempts to assist and educate parents along with their children.

Another important aspect of the cooperative school model is that it is based on the idea of creating affordable childcare or schooling for young children. The cost of daycare or a private



preschool can be too expensive for many families. Having parents volunteer regularly at the school, including helping out as classroom assistants, is a way to keep the cost down. Of course, because of busy work schedules not all parents are able to easily volunteer their time in the classroom, but many cooperative schools have adapted to the changing needs of families over the years and have created more flexible participation requirements, such as allowing grandparents or other caretakers to fulfill the school volunteer requirements (Coontz, p. 16). In essence, a cooperative school is a school established and run by parents. Parents create the school policies, goals and expectations, requirements for each participating family, and work closely with the teachers in the classroom. Through the process the parents have an intimate knowledge of the school, the teachers and staff, and other parents and children who go to the school. Likewise, teachers then have a personal relationship with each family that attends the school. A small school community is thus created.

### **Creating Community**

One of the most important aspects of the cooperative school, apart from creating a high-quality learning environment for young children, is to create a sense of community among members of the cooperative school. Many parents or families who join a cooperative school are often looking to connect with other parents, and so feeling connected to a community of parents through the school is critical. As Dunlap (1997) explains, isolation of new mothers is an important problem to address when it comes to children's schooling. From her research in a cooperative preschool in a low-income neighborhood, she found that "all caregivers said that they felt isolated and alienated when they began attending the preschool with their children" (p. 508). However, when these new mothers came together at the cooperative school, they learned

new parenting skills as well as building confidence “through social interaction in a safe, nurturing environment” (p. 511). Creating a space for parents to come together to share their struggles and gain ideas and tips from both teachers and other parents can help the entire family learn and grow together. Fenby (1970) notes, “From experiences with other mothers, the mother can gain emotional support, some insight, and a sense of camaraderie. The effect of all this on the alienated, inadequate, or isolated mother should not be underestimated” (p. 110). Research has also found that “cooperation [between schools and parents] can help to raise parents’ awareness with regard to parenting at home” (Oostdam & Hooge, 2013, p. 342). Having a sense of friendship and community among members of the cooperative school helps to create a more positive environment for everyone involved in the school, which can also enhance the sense of connection and responsibility toward the school and toward other families who are members of the cooperative school. This not only creates a better environment at the school, but these positive experiences then translate into better parenting in the home environment as well.

### **Parent Involvement**

The backbone of cooperative schools is parent involvement. Goldkind and Farmer (2013) state, “One essential element that has been found to enhance academic performance is parent involvement” (p. 240). Beyond improving future academic performance, parent involvement has also been shown to improve social adjustment for children as well as a sense of empowerment for parents (Coontz, 2003, p. 37; Pushor, 2012; Dunlap, 1997; Shepard & Rose, 1995). Research has demonstrated that parent involvement in a child’s school is not only about a child’s education but is about the parents’ education, too. Shepard and Rose (1995) point out, “A variety of non-cognitive indicators such as dropout rates, parental feelings of self-efficacy, and parental

attitudes toward school have also shown improvement as a result of involvement programs” (p. 373). This was also confirmed by Pushor (2012) who stated, “An extensive body of research shows that parents’ engagement in their children’s education positively affects students’ achievement. . . . Regardless of this knowledge, parents continue to be an untapped resource within each community” (p. 477). Parent involvement is key to a child’s educational success. Many schools rely on a model in which it is believed that education begins when a child first walks through the doors of school. The reality is that a child’s education begins when he or she is first born and takes place in the home and local community, primarily through the child’s experiences with his or her parents or caregivers.

Early childhood is a critical time that is often overlooked by the education sector, which places greater emphasis on schooling in the later years rather than on building a strong foundation in the earliest years of life. However, research has shown that, “During early childhood the brain is taking shape with a speed that will never again be equalled” (UNICEF, 2001, quoted in International Labour Office, 2012, p. 8). Although many studies examine parent involvement in schools in later years, parent involvement in the preschool years can serve as a foundation for a child’s educational career, as well as providing an example for parents in terms of how to create a strong and positive relationship with schools in future years. Because of the rapid growth that takes place during early childhood, children’s experiences and exposure to educational materials play a major impact in their development. “The early years are extraordinarily important in relation to a child’s development intellectually, emotionally, socially, physically and morally” (Laugharn, quoted in United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child et al., 2006, p. 20). Early childhood experiences have even been shown to be indicators for

the course one's life will take. A holistic approach to early childhood education, in which the child's family and community are actively integrated into the educational program, have been shown to be most effective (Engle, quoted in United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, et al., 2006).

Cooperative schools have taken this research into account and have created a holistic school environment in which the needs of the child, parents, and community form an integral part of the school. Coontz demonstrates that cooperative schools build a bridge for children between home and school and can help to strengthen the family overall (p. 41). Another important factor in learning and parent involvement in the school is the school's size. Research has shown that smaller schools tend to be more effective and better learning environments for children. Goldkind and Farmer explain, "Large, impersonal, bureaucratic comprehensive schools are believed to present many barriers to involvement . . . Case studies of effective alternative schools provide evidence of the importance of school size in promoting involvement" (p. 225). Because cooperative schools have few staff members and are reliant on parent participation to keep the school running, they are often small in size in order to ensure a high-quality experience for everyone involved. The small class and school size helps to ensure that children get the individualized attention that they need and that parents feel a personal connection with each other and with the school. It has also been found that it is important for parents to feel welcome and invited to participate at the school. If there isn't a structure in place where parents feel they can get involved, then they are left feeling as though they are outsiders to the child's schooling experience (Goldkind & Farmer, 2003; Pushor, 2012; McKenna & Millen, 2013). Parents are not going to volunteer to help a school if they feel that they are being pushed to the sidelines of the

school's agenda or that their particular perspective is not wanted or being heard by the school. In contrast to many other schools, the invitation for parent participation is incorporated into the cooperative school structure, encouraging parents to be actively involved in the school in many different ways.

Creating a school structure where parents are actively involved in the classroom and in running the schools means that parents and children are both learning together. Child-rearing is a new experience for most parents and requires a new set of skills and knowledge. Although parents have an intimate understanding of their own child, it's often helpful to get advice and parenting tools or techniques from other parents and professionals on how best to raise children. Coontz (2003) reveals:

Parent involvement in the cooperative encourages communication between the parent and teacher that focuses on the child. The ongoing, simultaneous interaction of parent, child, and teacher has something to offer each member of the triad. Parents are exposed to knowledge about how children develop, problem prevention and discipline strategies, and age-appropriate behavior expectations that encourage more effective parenting. . . . This arrangement allows parents to ask questions and "try out" new strategies in a supportive environment. . . . At the center of this triad is the child, who benefits from supportive linkages of home and school and shares important life experiences with his/her parent. (p. 40)

While cooperatives do have teachers and occasionally bring in outside professionals to give a talk on a particular topic for the parents, there is also recognition parents carry their own knowledge and expertise and can support one another. Fenby (1970) explains that parents in a cooperative benefit from observing the teacher in the classroom on a regular basis, as well as building friendships and a support network with other parents (p. 109). Seeing one's child in the context of interactions with a classroom of children can also help parents gain a better understanding of child development and the natural phases that children go through as they get

older. This can help to ease worries for parents who may feel that their child is not developing as they had expected. Seeing a number of children in a classroom on a regular basis exposes parents to the wide spectrum of temperaments and phases of development that children can go through, and parents can observe firsthand how all these children are able to learn and grow together.

### **Empowerment Model vs. Deficit Model**

If we examine the history of the development of schools and the public education sector we can see that it has been a long process that has slowly prioritized schools over families and local communities. The formalization and professionalization of teachers and school staff has created a culture of expertise that has diminished the role of parents in their children's education (McKenna & Millen, 2013, p. 14). Although access to schools and educations for all children is a positive step, downplaying knowledge learned outside the school can be harmful to the overall learning process. This over-reliance on schools as the sole arbiter on what is good or bad for a child's education creates a form of deficit thinking where parents, and eventually children who attend these schools, are made to feel inadequate and inferior to the so-called expert knowledge held by schools. Shepard and Rose (1995) explain that formal, compulsory education leads to a decline in importance of the parenting role. Parents became and were expected to be reliant on the school's judgment, and conversely less reliant on themselves and the knowledge and skills they brought to the table (p. 375). The term education has, in a sense, been co-opted by schools, thereby devaluing family, religious organizations, and community involvement in one's learning and growth and making schools the only place where learning takes place. Pushor (2012) expounds on this:

Educators, as holders of expert knowledge of teaching and learning, enter a community, claim the ground which is labeled 'school,' and design and enact

policies, procedures, programs, schedules, and routines for the children of the community. They often do this in isolation of parents and community members, using their ‘badge of difference’ . . . their professional education, knowledge, and experience, as a rationale for their claimed position as decision makers in the school. (p. 466)

While schools and professional educators do have knowledge and experience to share, this should not come at the cost of devaluing individual parents and families. Teachers and schools usually have nothing but the best intentions for their students, however the culture of many schools creates an unconscious bias against parents. McKenna and Millen (2013) explain, “Many current home-school engagement practices seem predicated on the notion that parents do not naturally operate in ways that are caring and involved for their children. Common assumptions held by administrators and teachers, often propagated in teacher education programs, are that educators must ‘teach’ parents how to be involved and ‘train’ them in ways of caring” (p. 11). New knowledge and practices can certainly be learned by parents through teachers but parents also have an intimate connection and knowledge of their children and do not necessarily need to be taught how to care for their children. Beyond this, teachers are often not given training on how to interact with and support parents. Pushor (2012) explains, “it is typical for teacher candidates to receive little or no preparation for working with parent in teacher education programs” (p. 474). Teacher education programs see the child as an isolated individual rather than as connected to people, organizations, and neighborhoods outside of the school. Without teacher preparation for positively interacting with parents, there is a tendency to view them as outside the learning process rather than as deeply embedded within it.

Rather than isolating parents from the education process, instead a supportive and reciprocal relationship with schools should be created. McKenna and Millen (2013) describe

how, “Parents are well equipped to participate in the educational process of their children and should have the opportunity to do so in meaningful and safe ways on a regular basis” ( p. 18). Parents often want to be included but space is not given for their participation beyond very small, supportive roles that are often defined without parent input. A more reciprocal relationship between families and schools has been termed an *empowerment model* and it “views individuals as belonging to interconnected, concentric environments” (Shepard & Rose, 1995, p. 375). The empowerment model recognizes the parent as the child’s principle educator and that parents should be viewed as respected partners with teachers or school staff; a family’s strengths should be emphasized rather than deficits; children need to be viewed within the wider context of their family and community environment and not just what happens once they walk through the school’s doors; and finally parents should be considered the best expert on their child and a valuable source of information (Shepard & Rose, 1995, p. 375). The goal of the empowerment model is for parents to recognize and value their contributions to their child’s education rather than solely relying on the school or teacher. Pushor (2012) clarifies that an empowerment model for parents creates a new story for schools, one in which “educators see their teacher knowledge and expertise as a complement to parent knowledge and as support in the parents’ lifelong work to realize their hopes and dreams for and with their children” (p. 472). When this happens “the structure of schooling shifts to one of relationship, shared authority, and mutually determined and mutually beneficial outcomes” (Pushor, 2012, p. 472.).

Cooperative schools, because of the way the school has been organized, follow an empowerment model for parent involvement. Parents are not seen as a threat or as something that’s slowing down the learning process, as is implied in the deficit model, but as playing an



integral role in their child's or children's education. Through their involvement in the cooperative school, parents learn many valuable skills that can be taken with them in various settings.

Research done at a cooperative preschool found that caregivers who participated in cooperative school went through an empowerment process whereby they gained confidence, cultural capital, and self-sufficiency (Dunlap, 1997, pp. 504, 509-510). An important piece of this process was that the learning took place within a community. Dunlap explained, "One of the most dramatic changes in the caregivers involved their transition from isolation to independence" (p. 508).

Parenting can be an isolating experience for new parents, no matter their economic strata or geographic location, so finding or creating a community where parents and children can learn and grow together is key to learning new skills that contribute to parents overall sense of confidence and self-worth. Cooperative schools address many issues that new parents and families face and create not only a school but a community that serves the needs of everyone who participates.

### **Summary**

In summary, cooperative schools address many of the challenges that other schools face. Some of the qualitative factors that are important to have at a school, such as a sense of community and a high level of parent involvement, are already built into the cooperative school model.

Overcoming the dichotomies we often create, such as where learning can take place and who is a teacher, plays an important role in the cooperative school experience. Cooperative schools represent an alternative approach to child care and school, especially for young children, that create a beneficial, cost-effective, and often long-lasting positive effect for families that are involved in them. Beginning the school process for one's child at a cooperative school, which

strives to empower parents and create strong ties between the school and home, encourages parents to feel they have a voice and a real, positive impact on their child's educational career.

## CHAPTER III RESULTS

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to get in-depth look and understanding of how a cooperative school functions. This study was guided by research questions that attempt to uncover the workings of a cooperative school: How is the school organized, who is involved, why do people choose to become involved in this type of school, and what are some of the benefits and challenges of this type of school model. These questions were answered through observation at the school, attendance at meetings, and three one-on-one interviews. The interviews took place on the school campus with Sally, the administrative director of the school; Melissa, one of the full-time head teachers in two of the children's classes; and Kristin, one of the parents who has had two children attend the school and has also sat on the Board of Directors of the school. All three interviews yielded a distinct perspective on the school and broadened the researcher's understanding of Pacific Cooperative School in particular and cooperative schools in general. The researcher, as a member of the cooperative school, gained insight of the school through participation in regular school activities and this knowledge will also be shared below. However, the three interviews will be highlighted and quoted extensively as they clearly demonstrate the unique nature of Pacific Cooperative School. Four particular and overlapping themes emerged in each interview and these include: community, parent education, the parent-teacher relationship, and implementing high quality early childhood education. These four themes will be highlighted below and quotes from the interviews will be shared based on the theme best represented through the dialogue.

### **School Basics and Background**

Pacific Cooperative School is relatively new, having been established seven years ago in 2007. The administrative director was one of the founders of the school, and having been with the organization since the beginning, much insight regarding the history of the school was gained through her interview. The school originally began as a small playgroup, with a few moms with young children getting together regularly to let their children play while they shared some social time with each other. The idea of creating a more formal organization took shape slowly as parents discussed how much they enjoyed what they were doing and felt that they had created something special that they didn't want to see go away. Sally shared, "people felt connected and felt like it was worth doing together. It's not worth doing it by yourself, but things are worth doing together." This quote is significant because it gets to the heart of the school, which from the beginning has focused on the importance of creating community and friendships among parents, as well as providing education for young children. This is also what makes Pacific Cooperative School stand out as unique among daycares and preschools. Among cooperative schools it's not just about the kids but about the parents as well.

As the original members of the playgroup began thinking about creating a more permanent organization, they discovered an organization called First Five San Francisco, a county-wide commission that provides financial support to organizations centered on the healthy development of children in the first five years of their lives. The parents of the playgroup decided to apply for a First Five Parent Action grant and received one for \$3,000 dollars. They were surprised that they actually received it, but they quickly had to get to work securing a space for their new school, as well as carefully keeping track of how all their funds were allocated.

Although the grant was a significant amount, they realized it was not enough to cover all of their needs, especially in terms of renting a building or room for the school. They quickly learned that relying on other organizations that were focused on helping the community would help them to get established. Sally explained:

Axis Café, which is where we had met initially, and that's where the baby group was still ongoing, they had a community room and they offered it to us for free. We could just use it, so we did. We were in Axis Café for about a year and a half rent free, which was a huge part of how we were able to start as well.

Axis Café is . . . owned by a church. . . . Because their mission was actually to support community . . . they were really wonderful to us. . . That is really how we started. It just kept taking shape.

Sally also discussed how other cooperative preschools in the area lent a hand in helping them to get established. Their playgroup was simply learning as they went, without previous knowledge or experience in cooperative schools. But Sally found that the cooperative school community played a major role in their learning process and helped them to become a more formally organized cooperative school. When discussing other cooperative schools in the area, Sally said:

They helped us enormously. We were trying to figure out how to structure anything; co-op jobs . . . we didn't really know anything when we started this. A particular parent gave us a tour and gave us all their materials: all of their policies, their procedures, their breakdown in co-op jobs. Another person in another co-op sent us more information; basically, people in the co-op community helped us try to figure out who we were and how to become what we wanted to become by not re-inventing the wheel in every instance.

Through the assistance of a grant, a local church, and other local cooperative schools Pacific Cooperative School was able to gradually find its way and formally establish itself as a pre-preschool and preschool cooperative school serving children between the ages of one and five years old. They've grown from a small, informal playgroup of five families to a school community made up of about sixty families. Pacific Cooperative School currently has five

classrooms but next year is reducing this to four classroom while increasing the number of days some of these classrooms are in session each week. The school heavily relies on parent participation to keep everything running smoothly, including regular involvement of parents in the classroom, as well as parents attending monthly meetings and completing what is known as a co-op job, a specific duty that each parent must fulfill at the school that includes a wide range of options from cleaning and maintenance to Web development. The goal is that parents will be able to find a co-op job that suits their particular needs and talents and will be able to contribute to the school in different ways.

Over the years Pacific Cooperative School has clarified the education model that they rely on and the type of school they would like to be. Because the school serves such a young age, the focus is on children learning through play and strengthening parenting skills and the family unit as a whole. Their Website describes the basic set-up of the school:

[Pacific Cooperative] is a cooperative pre-preschool and preschool. We believe that each child brings a unique set of skills to the classroom. Our curriculum is child-centered, play-based and developmentally appropriate. The Master Teacher in each class designs the curriculum to meet the needs of each individual child in the context of the larger group.

As parents and teachers, we work together to support all the children in developing greater social skills, problem solving skills, self-awareness and a sense of wonder and creativity.

Our community of families works both in and out of the classroom to make [Pacific Cooperative] a wonderful place to learn and grow. Every family participates in the classroom and holds a co-op job. . .

Overall Pacific Cooperative is still a work in progress. Though now fairly formalized, the school structure and other details continue to change based on the needs of families. One of the benefits of being a cooperative school is that there is a level of flexibility that is not always found at other schools. Because cooperative schools are organized and dependent on the families who join the

school, there is inherently a certain level of slow-moving change that is built into the school. Sally described it by saying, “a co-op community is always sort of organic and slow-moving.” Although this can include many challenges, it became clear through the interviews that cooperative schools provide many benefits to everyone who is involved in them.

### **Portraits of the School & Interview Participants**

Before jumping into the major themes that emerged through observations at the schools as well as through the interviews, it will be helpful for readers to gain a better picture of the school through detailed description of the location and the interview participants. Pacific Cooperative School is located on the southern end of San Francisco in a small building adjacent to a large Greek Orthodox Church. Pacific Cooperative rents the building from the Church but other than rent and sharing a parking lot, there is no connection between the two organizations. The school building is long but narrow, with the classrooms built next to each other length-wise with an equally long but narrow spread of concrete and a little grass outside of the classrooms for outside play. The school is surrounded by a metal fence, separating it from the church’s large expanse of lawn, which is sometimes used during the week by a homeschooling group connected to the church as well as occasional special events. Although the building does feel small at times and may not be the most ideal setting for a school, its location does provide easy access for families in San Francisco as well as several towns south of San Francisco, drawing from a larger geographic region than if it were located farther into the city. If one were to arrive at the school on a weekday morning, one will see a variety of toys, tricycles, children, and parents playing outside in the small outside space connected to the school. While the early morning in this area is

often quite foggy, it usually clears up before too long and provides a lovely, sunny setting for the school.

Each of the three interviews took place on the school campus. The interview with Sally, the administrative director of the school, took place in her office; the last and smallest room in the building, filled with two desks, two computers, filling cabinets, papers and books, and the occasional large delivery box filled with new materials for the school. While Sally spends a lot of time in her office, she can also frequently be spotted walking around the school chatting with teachers or parents and helping out in the classrooms when needed. Her light brown hair is usually pulled back in a low ponytail, thin-frame glasses enhance bright green eyes, and her face seems to be in a perpetual smile as she walks around the school. She is a true social butterfly and is always in motion: answering parents questions as she walks by, crouching down low to the ground to engage with a child, or sitting in front of her computer typing away as she works on some aspect of school administration. Although quite busy with keeping the school running smoothly, she never seems to mind when a parent pops into her office and interrupts whatever she's working on to ask a question or just to chat for a few minutes. Our interview involved the same casualness she always displays—happy to stop and talk about whatever is on your mind.

The interview with Melissa, the lead teacher in the two older-aged classrooms, took place while we sat cross-legged on her classroom floor. She said that as a preschool teacher sitting on the floor had become the most natural and comfortable setting for her. Melissa is tall and thin with long, dark wavy hair that she often pulls back loosely in a ponytail or bun. While very tall, she is most commonly found crouching down or sitting on the ground with kids—playing, reading a book, giving instructions, leading circle time, and so on. Melissa is great with both the



kids and parents. She's energetic, talkative, confident, and is able to easily give directions to both children and parents in the classroom. She usually checks-in with parents in the morning and at the end of the school day, asking how everything is going at home and sharing an anecdote about what someone's child was up to that day at school when it's a drop-off day for the parent. Our interview felt easy and natural, like an extension of the rapport we had already built through working in the classroom together.

The final interview was with Kristin, a mom who has been with Pacific Cooperative from its early days and who has sent two children to the school and who has also been active sitting on the Board of Directors of the school and so has been part of the decision-making process of Pacific Cooperative. The Board of Directors of Pacific Cooperative is made up of parents as well as the administrative director of the school, who meet monthly to discuss planning, any changes coming up, issues that may have arisen, and so on. Kristin and I agreed to meet in the Parent's Lounge at the school, a room that serves as the kitchen for snack and lunch prep and also dish duty, as well as providing a space for parents to sit away from the classroom. There is a large wooden table with a few chairs as well as couches on either side of the room. One will often find a parent or two in here during school hours, either working on their laptop or taking care of a younger sibling while class is in session. Kristin showed up with her youngest child strapped to her chest in a baby carrier, who was wearing a pink checkered hat and was all smiles about getting lots of attention from other moms. There were two other moms working on their laptops at the table in the Parent's Lounge, so Kristin and I decided to move over to Sally's office for our interview so as not to distract the others. We sat down and started talking, occasionally stopping to take care of the baby and to try to keep her entertained.

All three interviews were enlightening and representative of the different people and roles that contribute to a cooperative school. Each person provided a different perspective to the questions, demonstrating some of the breadth of what different people hope to give and get out of the cooperative school experience. Although their answers differed, some of the same themes emerged in each interview, as well as having come up at various meetings and during conversations with other parents, so these themes will be discussed in greater detail below.

### **Community**

The idea of community was the most prominent theme to arise during the interviews. How to create a sense of community at Pacific Cooperative is a goal that everyone seems to have in mind and is also something that is felt is present and an important part of the school. Each interview participant had a slightly different take on what community meant but the focus was on creating a sense of connection and friendships among parents, as well as providing a space for children to interact, socialize, and learn together. Sally described her thoughts on community at Pacific Cooperative:

There's such a value in parents coming together. I feel like that is the strength of any community, often at the heart of it. Virtually everybody can get behind the kids.

. . . In this community, and in any co-op community, I actually feel like that's one of the great benefits for parents. It's really a place where you can unload the challenges, really, of being a parent, and find resources, find other ideas. Because it's a community, even if you have an over-arching philosophy, there will be a lot of different ways to come at it. You will find, if you're looking for it, you can find your people. You have to look. In a community, you will be able to find the people that you really jive with, for whatever reason, or you know who you would go to for X. It may not be the same person in all cases, but there is a variety of resources that come out of knowing lots of parents.

Melissa, as a teacher, approached the idea of community through shared responsibility in the classroom and being a good example for children:

Community is such a big word but it really is everyone has a role, everyone has a job, and everyone's working together as it were. Talking about it, right? What better environment to teach children to be a really great model and show them that, yeah, everyone here has a responsibility. . . . It's just a great opportunity for the kids to see us all working together.

. . . You're not just getting the service here, essentially. You're not coming and . . . here I'm getting something from you. I feel like the co-op definitely makes it feel like we're all doing this together. You have a role in it too, that's it's not just on me. I really love that as a teacher.

. . . Why I really value it is is that we are hopefully getting back to a sense of culture that I think is lost nowadays, that we are here to help each other. . . . We do so well at being individuals and ignoring everything. I am the same. It's awesome to see a little bit of the homegrown sentiment that is a co-op and that potential that a co-op can breed at such a young age. Yeah, I think every parent, one of their top things is empathy. You want to teach your children empathy and I feel like the sense of community really drives that in.

Kristin, as a mother, looked at community in the sense of having other parents and families to turn to in need. In a sense, having a shared responsibility to raise and love each other's children.

When describing Pacific Cooperative she said:

It's like finding a home. It's like finding a second home because of the community. Everyone says community but I don't think they really understand. . . . [If] there's not a lot of family around and no other people who can really, you could turn to right away . . . But I feel like with a cooperative you have a built-in family there, at least a little network that could support you.

. . . Sometimes you can tell what people might need because you see them on a consistent basis so you know when they are happy and you can tell the difference. . . . Sometimes they could hide that stuff really well but here it's really hard to hide when you're having a hard time. It's right there. It's more profound than just building a community . . . we're building a family here.

Creating community is such a critical piece of a cooperative school since the school model is built on the idea of shared responsibility to the organization. Without community, the school would not function as well because what would be missing is the idea of responsibility for the caring of each other's children and families, as well as a sense of obligation to the school itself, to be the best that it can be for every child who attends.

## Parent Education

An important aspect of a cooperative school is that it is not only about educating children but also about educating parents, too. Parenting is a challenging endeavor for many people and being able to connect and commiserate with other parents is a huge benefit for most. Cooperative schools help parents to build friendships and networks with other parents, but also provide ongoing education through working in the classroom and attending regular parent education meetings. Sally discussed how participating in a cooperative helps parents improve their parenting and also helps to foster confidence in terms of parents engaging in their children's schools in the future:

I feel like in co-op land, you get to practice being a parent in front of other people. In my experience, people bring their best selves, for the most part. When people get really comfortable, you'll see some of the not-so-best selves, in the way that we . . . It's the same way with children. When children are truly comfortable, that's when you see tantrums. At school, there are the kids who reserve it for home, but when they're really comfortable, they'll just really be who they are.

I do feel like people get an example, for the most part . . . ninety-five percent of the time, ninety-five percent of the adults on campus are bringing their "A" game because they're parenting other people's children. They would want other people to bring their "A" game. . . . You'll hear better interactions. You'll hear more supportive talk. You'll also get to watch someone else help your kid, when you just are done.

. . . I think that becoming part of a co-op actually gives you a certain amount of practice, and therefore confidence at being a leader, and being an advocate for children. Knowing that your participation actually makes a difference, and raises the quality; it gives you knowledge, and it gives you, I think confidence to engage with the school.

When your comfort level is, "Of course I chat with the teacher about how they're doing, and about how my child is doing," those people become more practiced at engaging just in school culture, and feeling like they can be a part of it, and seeing a role for themselves.

Melissa talked a lot about parent education and how she hoped that what parents learn in the classroom includes skills and confidence in their parenting abilities that they can take with them to use at home and into the future:

If one of our kids is challenged in being cooperative in playing and we work on it, mom's here, teaching with me and this is like what I'm thinking and I can actually walk her through the process, not just give her the answers.

I can explain it developmentally or explain it with, through examples or understand why I'm asking a certain amount of questions and why I'm not just giving . . . if they can, if we can walk through that together it's like teaching someone to fish. . . . They get it. The kid internalizes it, understands it, and the parent internalizes it and understands it and it becomes something that they understand versus something that I'm telling them what to do. There's a lot of talk about this, it's called reflective practice for early childhood educators . . . No one will really learn if you just tell them. If they understand it and they understand the process and the theory and the proof of the theory it seems to stick a little bit better. You see, you hear it and then you hear them say it.

. . . Hopefully it's empowering in that sense. I have the skills I don't have to be [Melissa]. I don't need [Melissa]; I don't need [Melissa] right there with me I can think about what I would do in the classroom and what would be the solution using that same logic. How can we get through this? I hope it's empowering. I hope for the child and adult it's really empowering. My mommy's here to help me get through these things not just tell me no, don't, or whatever.

. . . It should be you learn this at a young age with your young children and you take that on with you. We teach our children to be self-confident, empowered kids. Speak their opinion and what a great, another great model for a coop to see your parent take that and carry the banner high through their coop and through their college experiences?

Yeah so I feel like, yeah I would want that. And to be a good example to the community. Obviously. Doing their positive discipline, using their developing appropriate language with their child. . . It's infectious you know when you're successful with that and I hope that that's what carries on. That sentiment that . . . you can make a difference with your children or in your school or in your family. You can change something that's maybe not working.

Kristin also talked a lot about parent education and how being part of a cooperative school provides a great space to learn new parenting skills, not only with your own child but also to understand how different children have different personalities and temperaments and to learn how to work with a wide variety of kids. Working in the classroom at a cooperative school acts as a training ground where parents can learn skills that they can take with them into the future as

their children transition into other schools. Notably, she also mentioned the importance of having humility as a parent, a willingness to learn and grow alongside your child or children:

First, it's been very enlightening as a parent because a lot of times you may read the books, you may go to the talks, if you don't actually apply them because you only have one type of child and you don't . . . at a co-operative you have so many varieties of children, you really can get a lot of experience in dealing with different temperaments because you'll never know, because you might have the second one and he's going to be different from the first one. . . . It's like getting practice being a parent over and over again every time you work here. It was really enlightening.

. . . I do think all parents should at least experience a co-op once in their life because I think it does train your awareness of how . . . what it takes to be a good parent and that there is a group of people that we could all bond . . . everything that I just spoke about earlier, I think everyone should go through it because I think it's a really lonely business being a parent in the city. A co-op really kind of . . . I don't know. It initiates you into the whole parenthood world for your first kid.

It builds a network or a platform of friends that you can build on for the rest of your life and it also trains you. This whole idea of coming to meetings and volunteering, that goes on for the rest of the kid's life. All schools need parents to volunteer. All kids need . . . all schools need parents who are involved and I think a co-op is a great training ground for that. I've noticed that in other schools, it's the parents who were in co-ops who are the most willing to volunteer and step up. . . . Public schools, they need so much support and help, they really won't be able to run without having the parents involved.

. . . I think everybody who becomes a parent has a huge responsibility to raise their kids the best way as they can and just, I wish everybody had the humility to just accept that I need to learn from other people and to really seek it out. I think a co-op is a place where you can have that learning experience as a parent plus all the great benefits of having your first friends. . . . The kids will always have whatever experience they have at a school but I, by picking co-op, I got a lot out of it. It wasn't just a school, it was my training ground as a parent.

The important role of parent education is a key piece of the cooperative model. While as much as possible is done to ensure a positive, high quality educational experience for children at the school it's also recognized that parents need to be educated, too. There may be a lot of books available regarding parenting, but learning side-by-side with teachers and other parents in a classroom provides the necessary practice everyone needs to learn and grow as a parent.

## **Parent-Teacher Relationship**

The connection between parents and teachers is considered important at any school, but this is especially so at a cooperative school because parents are regularly in the classroom with the teachers. This creates a closer relationship, in terms of both building a friendship as well as learning pedagogical tools from the teachers. The hands-on nature of cooperatives serve to improve the parent-teacher relationship. Sally discussed some of the early childhood education courses she's taken and how many people going into the teaching profession seem uncomfortable with the idea of interacting with parents, whereas at a cooperative school these interactions are naturally built into the school model:

You hear a lot of it in the [ECE] classes; people who just feel judged, or like their parents are watching them in a negative way. I feel that often, those partnerships that ought to be there are not because people are afraid. It's mainly about judgment. You'll hear people denigrate parents because, "That child, blah, blah, blah, they don't put him to bed early enough, or they . . ." You'll hear lots of opinions about their parenting style, about, "If we could just get this parent in line, then everything would be fixed for us in the classroom."

A paradigm [like that] would never, ever, ever work here. It can't. Really, even when we had lesser qualified teachers that was always a big part of it. "Can you work with grown-ups? You'll have to support them in the same way that you would children, a lot of the time. This isn't stuff that they know, and they're going to feel uncomfortable or challenged." That brings up lots of different things for different people, if you're in a new environment or you're challenged. Being able to give real support, both to children and to grown-ups, was a big . . . has always been a big part of it. I feel like all of our teachers have always had some degree of that connection with other parents as well.

Melissa, as a classroom teacher in a cooperative, talked about her personal experience having parents in the classroom and how she felt that teaching the adults was in many ways similar to teaching the children in the classroom. This doesn't mean that parents were slow to understand information, rather that learning is a process that involves information and experiences. She also discussed the importance of building trust and rapport with parents to aid in the learning process:

I think when I came here there's just one of me and there's so many of the adults that it became really hard to share my knowledge and help everyone so that was a big challenge I think initially. Also, I feel like not knowing them. Not having that rapport was challenging in that sense.

It was like, back to special ed, when we'd talk a lot about rapport in general in early childhood education. Building rapport and building trust is really important with the children but what I came to learn was that it's more important almost to build the trust with the adults. Make sure that the trust; the parents really trusted that I knew that what I was doing developmentally. Educational-wise, why I was setting limits, why I was not letting them play with the toy. I think that was hard getting them to trust me. Getting them to build that rapport with parents was hard.

. . . Everybody needs the teacher's help to a certain degree. Whether it's learning the routine for the kids or learning the routine for the parents. . . . What is the best way to assimilate everybody? Is it email, is it physical handouts, is it interpersonal verbal communication? I think it's a little of everything just like with the kids. . . . I need to learn by movement. I need to learn by actually doing it. Some kids will read a book and absorb all of it. Some kids will need to read a book and do the movement. Just like the adults. Some parents will need to read an email and then actually do it and do it maybe five times before they remember that we always put the blocks on that side.

. . . I mean it's I hope it's not insulting but it's a lot like teaching the kids. It's a really similar method as I would teach the children I would teach, is how I teach, I would like to be able to teach the adult.

. . . The feedback I get makes it very rewarding and makes it all worthwhile. While it's a challenge it's just like with kids. It's so rewarding when you see the progress and you see a parent whose been working really hard trying to do this one thing and then we work on it a couple different ways and we finally manage to hear that click so that they can carry home, and it works at home not just at school.

. . . I feel like that makes it, it feels like the warm fuzzies I think that other teachers in other environments might not get so much because we're getting constant feedback from you guys. Whether it's a smile if we did something funny and the kids did something funny while you're here and you caught it. We both caught it and we kind of joked on it and giggled about it. . . . It's a different experience when you come pick up and drop off then when you're here all day. Sometimes more exhausting but it makes it more interesting for me for sure, and I hope that it makes it more interesting for you guys, too, in that sense.

Kristin, as a mother in a co-op school, said she enjoyed and had learned a lot from her experience in the classroom. Having an older daughter at another school made her realize



how special the parent-teacher relationship is at Pacific Cooperative and how it's difficult to have the same connection to teachers, children, and parents at a different school:

I've had a very positive experience with working with the teachers here and knowing how they think because it's really different than how mommies think because they have a goal in mind, whereas you just kind of do things sometimes . . . It helps change the way I do things and there's a long-term strategy that I've learned from them.

. . . You're not really a staff but at the same time, if you really want to help, you have to think of yourself as a staff in that four hours that you're here and really want to assist the teacher. It's just . . . it's practicing. I love being in the classroom because I get to see my son. I get to see my child interact with other kids. It's a great opportunity and I . . . when my daughter went to a preschool that is not a co-op, I missed that so much. Just wondering what they're doing every day, who are they playing with? Once you go out of a co-op, it's completely silent. You have a teacher conference twice a year and that's it. . . . Here, if I walk in and it wasn't my working day, other parents would tell me what my son did that day.

In another preschool, some teachers do it, some teachers don't. You know what, they just kind of . . . they don't give such a big picture of how your kids are doing which is really . . . it's kind of nice to know.

Establishing a strong relationship between the teachers and parents is not so much about friendship as it is about helping parents to understand early childhood education through hands-on experience. Being in the classroom gives parents a chance to see how their child interacts with others, how other children behave, and how teachers respond in a developmentally-appropriate way. This gives parents a better understanding of their children's personality and learning process, as well as tools that they can use outside of the classroom. This does not mean that parents working in the classroom is always an idyllic experience, as difficulties can and do arise. But it does mean that parents are learning and growing alongside their child, going through challenges and small victories with a community of parents and teachers by their side.

### **High Quality Early Childhood Education**

The importance of high-quality education was another theme that emerged during the interviews and the participants discussed how they felt Pacific Cooperative, as well as

cooperative schools in general, are able to achieve this. High quality education is a theme at any school and Pacific Cooperative is always striving to improve the education they offer. Many plans for changes in the upcoming year has happened this past year at Pacific Cooperative, showing the investment that the school has to grow and improve. Two of these major changes include applying for and receiving a grant to become a Preschool For All site in San Francisco, a program within First Five San Francisco (where Pacific Cooperative got their original grant) to offer quality preschool for four-year olds in San Francisco. The school went through a fairly rigorous process to get approved as a Preschool For All site and this has meant a lot of work has gone into making sure Pacific Cooperative meets high standards for a preschool, and it also means a reduction in cost for four-year-old students next year as well as funding to buy new equipment for the school. In addition to receiving the Preschool For All grant, Sally has been doing a lot of work to roll out more inclusive curriculum in the classroom, which is called anti-bias curriculum. Although children at a pre-preschool and preschool may seem young for conversations about bias, a number of studies have shown that the earlier discussions around difference are brought up with kids, the better the results in terms of preventing biased thinking (Bronson & Merryman, 2009, pp. 47-69). During our interview Sally discussed what she thought cooperative schools have to offer in terms of quality early childhood education, as well as her plans and hopes regarding introducing anti-bias curriculum at Pacific Cooperative:

I think that over time, what I have come to learn in relation to co-ops that I didn't know when I started was quality childhood education and care. . . . When I'd go to an ECE class is, it's already built into our model. When they talk about the biggest advantages or resilience, all of these things that factor into a child being strong and doing well. They have a home school connection, all of those things; they're already a part of the co-op model.

. . . You really do know what's going on in the classroom, when you're a part of a co-op, because you actually know the children. . . . You really begin to . . .

you know so much more about your child's development, because you have a peer group that you actually get to see your child in context. That can make for a better parent. I think that our . . . the co-op model also means that parents are always talking about parenting and about their lives in that way that is conducive to parental sanity. You have someone to vent to about the potty training. You have someone to vent to about the lack of sleep.

. . . Anti-bias is too important, philosophically, and core to the school, and getting that rolled out. I feel like I don't want to miss this crop of kids who's going elsewhere; off to kindergarten or elsewhere. I want very much for this discussion to happen. This is not going to be a popular discussion. I think it's going to be one where people will actually remember it years down the road. This will keep coming up, and they will remember that the first time they actually talked about this in a group of other parents was at [Pacific Cooperative].

. . . I feel like pre-school is the time; that's the most important time to talk about it, and to set a different . . . set children on a different path. I think a lot about morality and ethics and what do we teach children about how to be in the world? To me, anti-bias . . . this is how I'm trying to get there. Anti-bias, to me, sums up a lot of what I think is the most important groundwork we can lay, for children to figure out who they are, as they are growing up and making decisions in how to treat other people.

Laying that groundwork is really important because I think, again, it's irrespective of who you are. Regardless of your identity; whether it's transgender, racial, religious, able-ness, all of those things. Whatever sums you up, in all of the little boxes you can check on a federal form . . . I would want all people to be able to look at everyone with, "What positive things can you bring to the world?" instead of just a disregard like, "I don't have anything in common with you."

Melissa discussed early childhood education and how she felt parents were learning a lot about it just by being in the classroom.

We talk a lot about development and appropriate behavior. And developing appropriate behavior just in that's something that's big in the ECE world already but I think that, that's what I like to make parents very aware of. Because I think we're always comparing our kids and wanting them to do better.

. . . ECE has its own curriculum and its own major and its own degree but there's a lot that you guys are already understanding and learning in the classroom. Why wouldn't you be competent and able to learn the same information that we're getting?

Kristin, as a mother, discussed the importance of having a safe and nurturing environment for children, which she feels Pacific Cooperative is able to provide. Having parents in the classroom is also a way to ensure that all the children, as well as the parents, are getting the attention and nurturance that they need. Even if a child is going through a difficult phase, rather than simply punish the child and blame the parent, as sometimes happens at other schools, there's a more supportive and loving environment to help the child and family learn how to cope with and hopefully overcome whatever problem is arising. Kristin has a son who went through a phase where he would bite other children and she focused a lot on this particular time and discussed how hard this was and how she felt Pacific Cooperative in particular helped both of them to get through it.

Our co-op especially is a very safe environment for both children, the one who bites and who gets bitten. I think the irony is that if you . . . most preschools focus on the kid who got bitten but not on the kid who bites, so you never fix that behavior . . . not fix but you never help that child leave that phase of their life without having some kind of lasting impression of themselves and so this school focus on both sides.

To protect the child who is bitten but also to help the child who is biting or having an aggressive behavior overcome those things with the right way of thinking, the right way of receiving whatever threat he considers was happening. Also supporting the parent, it's awful to have a child who bites. Everyone forgets that the parent . . . I mean, of course, parents react differently but I'm pretty sure almost all of us who have kids who bite feel awful. You don't want to be that parent. We don't want to be the one who is judged because our kid bites.

Some people think it's the parent's fault. It's just one of those things. It's like such a . . . not that everyone thinks that but there's a spectrum of people who do think that, right? In our co-op I know that I was supported by the teacher. They let me know what was going on and they helped me . . . especially [Sally] get the perspective of, this is what we need . . . we need to do this to support him and to support you and not to make me feel bad.

. . . I think he came out better than most kids from that phase. Most kids stop this behavior by three, three and a half, especially if they started around two but . . . the way the kid comes out is all different. I think some kids who weren't properly . . . who were not supported throughout that phase come out thinking they are bad. "I'm a bad kid. I'm a bad boy." He did say things like that but it was always corrected here.

High quality education can come through in a number of ways, whether it's taking in the long-term vision and rolling out new curriculum as the administrative director has done or it's thinking about a particularly difficult phase with one's child, as Kristin did, and how the school helped her and her son to get through it. Having strong relationships between teachers and parents, and among parents themselves, allows for a more inclusive, community-oriented school than in itself helps to promote quality education for young children.

### **Summary**

In summary, four major themes emerged during this study. These included: community, parent education, the parent-teacher relationship, and implementing high quality early childhood education. These themes emerged during the interviews as well as through observation during everyday interactions and at regular meetings as important aspects of Pacific Cooperative. It is hoped that this study helps to paint a picture of what a cooperative school is and some of the benefits that this type of school model can provide for children and families. Although involvement in a cooperative school may not be a practical option for all families, cooperative schools are organizations that should not be overlooked. Pacific Cooperative, like many cooperative schools, emerged organically through the concerted efforts of a small group of mothers who began getting together for a weekly playgroup. The story of Pacific Cooperative is one that can be repeated elsewhere: if parents feel something is missing in terms of educational opportunities or a sense of neighborhood community, it is possible to build it. Cooperative schools are able to provide education for both children and parents, demonstrating that education is a lifelong process, not one that simply starts and ends in the classroom. Cooperative schools,

especially during the early childhood years, offer a unique opportunity for parents and children to learn and grow together among a community of families.

## CHAPTER IV DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to understand the nature of cooperative schools through an in-depth study of one cooperative pre-preschool and preschool in San Francisco. Because this model of school is not well known, this study was designed to shed light on the basics of how this type of school functions, as well as to uncover some of the underlying motivations of some of the people, both parents and staff, involved in a cooperative school. Through observations and interviews, as well as through personal involvement in the school as a parent, a great deal regarding the general layout and underlying culture of the school was uncovered. While some of the basics of a cooperative school have been discussed above—the principle factor being the regular involvement of parents in all aspects of running the school, including volunteering in the classroom—the overlapping themes uncovered through the interviews point toward deeper beliefs beyond simply finding a good school for one's child. Of course, the importance of early childhood education is something that is certainly on the mind of everyone involved at Pacific Cooperative, but this does not tell the whole story. Ideas about education and community emerged—both within the physical classrooms and school as well as outside it—demonstrating that Pacific Cooperative, and cooperative schools in general, are symbolic of many parents and teachers longing for schools to be something more than simply a classroom, that schools should be about creating a community where learning can take place in a supportive environment.

As was discussed in the literature review, parental involvement is a key factor in cooperative schools. Creating a structured system within the school for regular, ongoing parental involvement provides many benefits for children and parents. It fosters a sense of connection and

community within the school, which clearly came up in the interviews, and it also helps to create a bridge for learning between the school and home, so that what is learned at school is then reenforced at home (Coontz, 2003, p. 40). With a nursery and pre-school aged group of children this is not so much about homework, as it would be with older students, but about developing appropriate emotional, social, and intellectual skills and behaviors. It is also about teaching parents how to develop positive strategies for dealing with any difficult behavior or phases their children go through. Creating a school environment that is about not only a child's learning but also about a parent's learning enables the entire family to benefit from the schooling experience.

Cooperative schools, Pacific Cooperative included, rely on a school model that focuses on integrating and empowering parents rather than one in which parents are considered outside of the learning process. While having staff with expertise in child development and education is important, as Shepard and Rose (1995) point out, it is also equally important for parents to be acknowledged as the experts on their own child or children and for their thoughts and contributions to be valued by the school. In Pacific Cooperative this empowerment model that includes parents, while also working at strengthening their skills, is a key attribute of the school's structure. The interviews with members of Pacific Cooperative also made clear that a common goal is that when parents leave they do feel empowered to play an active role in their child's education, no matter what school their child attends. It is hoped that the cooperative school experience with young children will enable parents to carry what they've learned forward with them for years to come and create more positive interactions and relationships at future schools.

Although parent involvement and empowerment are important aspects and goals of Pacific Cooperative, this should not be taken to mean that cooperative schools are not without



their own challenges. Pacific Cooperative, like any school or organization, has its share of difficulties. Many of them are typical of nonprofit organizations or school in general—stress about ensuring that there is enough funding to keep everything running smoothly; the fact that some parents work harder and contribute more volunteer hours than others, making equity and accountability a constant discussion for the administrative director and board of directors; and being located in San Francisco means that once children get too old for Pacific Cooperative and head off to kindergarten, parents are thrust into a competitive public school system that involves school tours, a ranking system, and often long wait-lists for preferred choices and parents are not immune from the intense pressure that pervades this school system. However, during the short time the families are able to be a part of Pacific Cooperative, usually for about one to three years for most families, children and parents get the chance to be a part of something different from the typical daycare or school experience. They get the chance to be part of a school where parent involvement and a sense of community are prioritized. As the interviews above made clear, this creates a positive and lasting impression on parents, teachers, and children. Creating a supportive network among parents and between the school and parents not only improves the school but carries over to the home environment as well, positively impacting a child's life and learning both within and outside the classroom (Fenby, 1970; Oostdam & Hooge, 2013).

Although parent involvement is one of the key factors of a cooperative school, deeper analysis of ideas about community and education can shed light on the motivations and philosophy behind cooperative schools and the families that choose to join them. Belonging to a community creates ties and support for people. The idea of community is going to look different for different people and in different contexts, and in Pacific Cooperative a particular vision about

community and education emerged through the interviews, one that is reminiscent of ideas articulated in the field of critical or engaged pedagogy by well-known theorists and thinkers such as Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and many others. Paulo Freire, as one of the first and leading figures in the field of critical pedagogy, has written extensively about the true meaning of education and how it is quite distinct from what is found in most schools today. To begin, he critiques some of institutions we hold sacred, such as schools, and explains that these are not neutral, value-free locations. He explains, “a rigid and oppressive social structure necessarily influences the institutions of child rearing and education within that structure. These institutions pattern their action after the style of the structure, and transmit the myths of the latter” (2011, p. 154). The increasing isolation of many nuclear families and individuals; the over-reliance on so-called expert knowledge, especially in the realm of parenting; the increasing trend toward high stakes testing, accountability of teachers, and harsh disciplinary practices, even beginning in preschool, are all prevalent themes in U.S. society today that are evidence of the increasing rigidity of social structures that Freire discusses. He is especially critical of how most schools educate children, viewing children as blank slates to be filled with knowledge rather than as fully human, with their own thoughts and temperaments (p. 72). Of course children need guidance but this does not negate who they are as people.

Pacific Cooperative works hard to value the unique contributions of each child and parent. The cooperative school model also throws into question the assumption of teacher as ultimate authority and children as learners. Having parents in the classroom throws off this balance, which can take either a positive or negative path depending on the child and parent and their relationship with each other, but nevertheless it questions the typical school model. Having

both teachers and parent-teachers in the classroom also means they are put in a position where they must rely on and learn from each other. Parents are not viewed as without knowledge, even though they may not have any degrees or expertise in early childhood education, but they are understood as providing a valuable and indispensable contribution to the school. Freire, when discussing teachers, explains that their “efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them” (p. 75). This may sound as though this wouldn’t apply at Pacific Cooperative since the age range of the children that attend Pacific Cooperative are between one and five years old but the point is that the children, parents, and teachers are all willing to be in a process of learning together. This does not mean that no directions or discipline is shared with the children, on the contrary this is necessarily done quite often with young children. However, having parents in the classroom changes the dynamic to one in which humility and reciprocity are present among both teachers and parents to facilitate the educational process for the young students.

Creating community within a school setting means that the school must feel like more than just a building with classrooms. It cannot feel impersonal; parents and students must feel intimately connected to each other. Kristin, the parent interviewed for this project, even went so far as to call it a second family. Katherine Whiteside Taylor, an early and strong proponent of cooperative schools in the United States, echoed this same idea. She said, “Parent cooperatives are one creative answer to the deepest challenge of our time, the need to develop persons capable of understanding and working harmoniously with their fellows. . . . Parents come to really care for each other, and become a sort of family of families” (quoted in Hewes, 1998, pp.162-63). A school community or family doesn’t mean that everything runs perfectly all the time. Rather, it

means that there are people who know and care for one another within the school, even when challenges arise. Throughout this project it became clear that while the parents are looking for and become invested in the school's community, it's really lead by staff and teachers who are deeply committed to this ideal and do their best to turn it into a reality at Pacific Cooperative. Creating community takes time and effort and Sally and Melissa both demonstrated a commitment to developing a sense of community within the classrooms and in the school, with the hope that parents will take and use these ideas outside of the school as well.

bell hooks (1994) has also discussed the need to build a sense of community within a classroom setting as well as some thoughts on how to go about doing this. While she focuses on the university classroom it seems that many of her ideas can translate to any location, including a preschool. When describing a classroom she says, "Seeing the classroom always as a communal place enhances the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community" (p. 8). This seems to especially apply to a cooperative school where teachers and parents are working together in the classroom. This communal effort to raise and educate young children creates a unique environment where everyone involved has a stake in the learning process. It seems that children will also be able to pick up on this shared effort and responsibility in the classroom and will be able to feel how invested all the adults in the classroom are in their lives. Because most of the adults in the classroom are mothers, though there are some fathers working as parent-teachers in the classroom as well, there's a sense of shared responsibility for raising each other's children, at least while everyone is at school. This means that children are not only being supervised but are also deeply cared for by all the adults present. Although this is

fundamental to how Pacific Cooperative operates as a school, this often applies outside of school for many families as well.

This communal approach toward educating children is one that, as Melissa explained, is hoped will lead toward a sense of empowerment for parents. hooks discussed a similar sentiment: “Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. The empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks” (p. 21). Although the children at Pacific Cooperative are very young, learning always involves risks. Whether you are learning to ride a tricycle for the first time or are in college attempting to write a difficult paper learning requires growth, which can be difficult. The same is true for the parent-teachers at Pacific Cooperative, who must also enter a space where they are in a position of learning. This can feel very vulnerable, especially since parenting is a much more personal and complex challenge than academic learning. But acknowledging the need for help and welcoming feedback and ideas from teachers and other parents within a cooperative community can lead to a sense of empowerment. This does not mean that parents at cooperative schools are suddenly perfect or that the school is without challenges, but that there is an understanding that reciprocity and humility, from both parents and the school, is a key ingredient for school success. Pushor (2012) explains that reciprocity is a “critical attribute of meaningful parent engagement” and that we must “reimagine the work of a teacher as centered on a ‘co-construction of curriculum with parents, children, and other family members.’ . . . Such a coconstruction ‘acknowledges that children are cared for and educated at home and they cared for an educated at school’ (pp. 472-73).

Shepard & Rose (1995) discussed the importance of relying on an empowerment model within schools rather than a deficit model. The empowerment model recognizes the primary role that parents play in children's lives and the strengths that families can bring to the learning process. The empowerment model also encourages parents to be a part of their children's learning process. By using a school model that focuses on both the parents and the children, both the school and the home benefit. School and home may be physically separated from one another but need to be understood as deeply connected, interwoven entities. Pacific Cooperative, and cooperative schools in general, recognize the reciprocal nature of this relationship and do their best to look at the whole picture of a child's life and learning and not solely at what's happening within the classroom.

For families who choose to join cooperative schools there seems to be some recognition, at least during the earliest years of their child's life, that a school should be more than just a school. Early childhood is one of the most critical times in a child's life in terms of intellectual, emotional, and social development and building a strong educational foundation can have a positive life-long impact and holistic educational models that integrate the family in the learning process have been shown to be most effective (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child et al., 2006). The cooperative school model follows this line of reasoning and research and attempts to include parents and families as much as possible in their early childhood education programs. Pacific Cooperative has created a structured, holistic, early childhood education program in which parent involvement is recognized as integral to a young child's learning and growth. Cooperative schools not only strive for high quality education but also value the needs of parents and families, too. This encourages the building of something more than just a school.

This was described in the interviews through terms like community, a second family, and a sense of empowerment. This, it seems, should be the ultimate goal of education—learning the value of each other, including whole families and communities, as we all strive to better ourselves and the world around us.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the organization and culture of one cooperative pre-preschool and preschool in San Francisco. Cooperative schools have generally not been covered very well by academic literature and this study aimed to showcase some of the unusual attributes of cooperative schools. The aim of this study was to demonstrate that while we are accustomed to schools being organized in a particular way, there are other possibilities for how a school could be organized and these differences can provide some of the benefits that many schools and daycare centers are lacking today. The focus of this study centered on how parent involvement, which has been shown to be critical to school success through many studies, is built into the cooperative school model. This study also hoped to show that regular, systematic parent involvement is not only good for the child but for the parents, family, and community as a whole.

Other key attributes of a cooperative school that emerged during this study were a strong relationship between teachers and parents, building a connection between the school and the home, and a sense of responsibility and community within the school. All of these factors that have been shown to improve student performance at other schools are built into the cooperative school model itself, meaning these key attributes of a strong and positive learning environment for children are always present. The other aim of this study was to expand academic knowledge on cooperative schools. While many studies cry out for the need to find ways to increase parent

involvement in schools, little attention has been given to the parent's perspective on this issue or to the cooperative school experience. Pushor explains that there is a "lack of research in the field that examines parent engagement through the eyes of parents, rather than through the eyes of educators or educational researchers" (p. 476). As a parent involved in a cooperative school coming at this topic from an insider's perspective, my hope was to shed some light in this arena of educational research that has so far been overlooked.

### **Recommendations**

My recommendation following this study is that cooperative schools continue to be studied within the field of academic educational research. Pacific Cooperative is one school with its own particular structure and community. Although cooperative schools all share some similarities, each will have its own unique attributes. A comparative study of a number of different cooperative schools would help to uncover some of the differences, both positive and negative, that can be found at a variety of cooperative schools. In addition to this, including the voices of participants at cooperative schools, especially parents, seems a necessity to truly understand the cooperative school experience. A study that expands the scope of including parent's perspective and experiences at schools would be a great asset toward the field of educational research, especially in terms of expanding the knowledge of the particular school model and benefits that cooperative schools aim to offer families.



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