

Societal changes throughout the world are affecting families and schools. Because the development of children takes place in the context of both family and school, parents, policy-makers and educators must understand the changes that both institutions are undergoing.

Although exceptions exist, it is possible to identify five key societal phenomena in most regions of the world that directly affect families and how they interact with schools. Increasing urbanization, changes in the labor force (especially the increase in the number of women who work outside the home), new technology (especially television and micro-computers), the growth of knowledge and information, and the movement to decentralize responsibility for people's lives (including education) all have implications for human relationships in general and family life in particular.

Increasing Urbanization

Twenty-five years ago there were only 150 cities in the world with a population of over 500,000; today there are approximately 500. The creation of urban conglomerates changed family organization and habits.

- There is generally less space available for family life than in rural areas.
- More time is spent in daily travel from home to work, to school, and to other places.
- Family-household size tends to decrease; the costs of raising children are higher.
- Overstimulation, a crowded home, excessive noise, lack of personal space to study and other factors associated with life in urban settings can all negatively affect school performance.¹
- The growth of urban centers has not been accompanied by an increase of employment in the formal economy or of welfare services.
- Migration – from a rural area to a city, from a city to a small town, from one country to another – is a common experience for many children.

- Increases in population mobility resulted in increased chances of conflict between families and schools and between these institutions and society at large.

Changes in the Labor Force

The industrialization process that began three centuries ago in Great Britain has influenced all nations. The effects of industrialization on society go beyond the restructuring of the labor force or the vast migrations of people from rural to urban areas.

- Industrialization resulted in a demand for specialization and the development of technological skills and attitudes.
- The resulting re-organization of society included changes in people's attitudes, values, and ideologies with the old overlapping with the new.²
- The growing participation of women in the labor force places the female share of the labor force close to that of the male.³

Although women's work competes with their activities as mothers, female employment in itself does not seem to have had the negative consequences on children's education or intellectual development that many originally thought it might have. On balance, it would seem that it is the quality rather than the amount of time spent in the relationship between mother and child that is important, as well as the quality of supervision and care of the children while the mother is not at home.

Technology

New technologies are everywhere influencing people's lifestyles and their interpersonal relationships. In the home, they can free women from domestic chores, allowing them to spend more time with their children. However, they can also absorb children's time, interfering with their opportunities for richer human exchanges. The effects of technology in the home can be illustrated by research findings on television and micro-computers.

- Research suggests that higher levels of television viewing are associated with slightly lower grades at school in the United States⁴ and in lower achievement in science and mathematics in the United States as well as in a number of other countries.⁵
- In other social contexts (Latin America), television viewing has been found to be positively related to reading habits; the explanation for this

may lie in the fact that television sets are more common in better-off homes in developing countries.⁶

- Many families today tend to meet around the television set, and television programs frequently form important conversational topics.⁷
- Although sales of micro-computers for family use are increasing, it appears that children who have micro-computers at home prefer to use them for electronic games, and not for academic purposes.⁸

It is not the presence of technology, but its use that can improve human relationships and education. Parents may have to compensate for technologies by intensifying care and family relationships.

The Growth of Knowledge and Information

One of the positive aspects of recent technological development is the increasing access to vast pools of knowledge by many people. But it is not without its drawbacks.

- A critical difference between a middle-class family and an isolated peasant family lies in their differential ability to access information and to use it.
- The new demands for living imply a continuous and selective use of knowledge and the skills to adapt to changing circumstances.
- The continual expansion of knowledge is a constant challenge to schools, since it implies the need to update curricula. This can result in parents becoming less able to help their children with their school-work.
- New approaches and the teaching of new content in schools can widen the gap between school and home, especially when the culture of the school is clearly different from that of the home.

The Movement Toward Decentralization

The development of welfare systems in many industrialized countries has increased government responsibility for child care and education. However, changes in population patterns plus the worldwide slowing of economic growth have resulted in competing demands for diminishing resources.

- There is concern in countries, such as the United States, that the administration of social services designed to improve the well-being of the increasing number of older people has resulted in a deterioration of

services for children.⁹

- Formal educational institutions for children are getting less resources at a time when more is being expected of them as the roles of other institutions in the child's education decrease.
- The underfunding of education is not being helped by the fact that rates of economic growth are slowing in developed countries, while economic adjustment and social changes are taking place in developing ones.

The decentralization movement raises questions about how best to help families provide the unique input they can make into children's education.