

Race, Community, and Urban Schools: Partnering with African American Families
by Stuart Greene
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The stories in *Race, Community and Urban Schools* by Stuart Greene are meant to speak back to the deficit-laden depictions of low-income minority families that “distort our perceptions of families and children” (p. 8). These stories are discussed through an ecological lens that shows how parents’ sense of agency is connected to the relationships between parents’ roles in their children’s education, economic and education policies, and relevant historical contexts. In his introduction, Greene establishes the vital need for authentic portrayals of low-income, African American families that show how they actively construct supportive roles in their children’s education. Greene steps away from approaches to parent involvement that focus solely on how parents develop academic capabilities. Instead, he suggests looking at the ambience of parent involvement, which refers to the ways parents create an atmosphere of support for their children (Jeynes, 2005; Pushor, 2010). He proposes this can be done through counternarratives that describe how parents define their roles in the context of race and urban development. Notably, he also stresses the importance of children’s perceptions of how their parents are involved in these counternarratives.

The main source of data for the book comes from a participatory action research project designed by Greene and a school principal interested in increasing parent involvement in her school. The project, which is outlined in chapter 2, involved a group of parents and educators meeting weekly for a period of two years. Greene also uses data from a study he conducted about children’s perceptions of how their parents support their education. While the primary focus of the book is on race and parent involvement in schools, Greene’s background in literacy research is also evident. Many of the counternarratives he tells have to do with the role literacy plays in home-school relationships.

Chapter 1 is a reflection on Greene’s observations of the purposeful and affectionate support parents provide for their children’s reading, which causes him to wonder why low-income minority parents are often characterized by their lack of involvement in schools. Greene reflects on conversations he had with teachers about working with parents in relation to literature on low-income minority parents’ involvement in their children’s schooling. He notes disconnects and contradictions that emerge from differences in parent and teacher orientations to parent involvement. He criticizes research that ignores the complexity of families’ lives and the role race plays in their experiences. He also offers a critical and thought-provoking take on familiar literature such as Lareau’s (2000; 2003) work on social capital in home-school relationships. Greene goes on to discuss societal structures such as schooling, wealth, urban development and their relationships to African American families and communities. Here Critical Race Theory (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) and Critical Geography (Apple, 2011; Feagin, 1998; Harvey, 2007; Soja, 2010) are introduced to illuminate the lived experiences of African American families. In doing so, Greene points out that “[t]o ignore a legacy of education borne of struggle is to engage in a purposeful kind of forgetting” (p.35).

In chapter 2, Greene presents stories about parents and educators from the participatory action research project. Rather than constructing a parent involvement program, the school staff agreed to listen to the parents' stories about education. Through these stories, the principal broadened her ideas about parent involvement. In addition to learning that parents were involved in helping their children with things like homework, she began to find value in the ways parents supported their children that went unseen. Here, Greene suggests current education policies' focus on defining parent involvement as aiding the isolated academics of school could "negate the rhythms of students' learning and the kind of teaching that follows children's development in culturally relevant ways" (p.51).

The importance of social capital in parent involvement also emerges in this chapter. Greene shows this through discussions of advocacy, which he defines as "an emerging set of strategies that parents learned over time as a means for gaining opportunity for their children in school" (p.57). There are descriptions of how social capital functioned in parents' lives and how the action research group became a space for the creation of social capital. Many parents lived in relative social isolation. The weekly meetings widened the range of people parents interacted with and helped develop a strong sense of community where parents worked together to improve their children's education.

Bringing children's voices into conversations about parent involvement is the focus of chapter 3. Stories from 4 fifth and sixth grade children are told that demonstrate how parents' kinds of support are responsive to both academic and emotional needs. The children's counternarratives draw attention to the idea that their struggles in school might not be attributable to a lack of parental support, which leads Greene to a discussion about the role structural inequalities play in children's schooling. These stories also provide understanding for which supports the children found valuable. The children treasured the loving and responsive ways their parents addressed their needs, deepening connections to their parents. Consequently, Greene wonders if teachers' emphasis on assessment and standards are influencing parents in ways that leads them to make home environments more like school. Concerns are raised that such narrow definitions of parent involvement could be taking parents' attention away from supporting children's wide-ranging needs.

The nature of social interaction in schools is the focus of chapter 4. Greene argues for a reciprocal approach that places dialogue at the center of parent/teacher relationships. The importance of communication is typically stressed in parent involvement. However, it is often defined by one-way announcements providing parents with school information. Instead, Greene highlights the importance of having conversations "to convey a sense of reciprocity, dialogue, empathy, and mutuality" (p.100). Having conversations can help parents and teachers understand each other's perspectives, which Greene believes is a necessary step in creating new ways to approach parent involvement in schools.

Throughout *Race, Community and Urban Schools*, Greene's commitment to reimagining possibilities for African American families in urban schools is clear as he challenges "a dominant narrative that portrays low-income African American families as detached and uninvested in their children's education" (p. 109). Greene believes discourses about low-income African American families need to reflect their lived experiences, and his book offers just that. The book's conclusion in chapter 5 introduces a social justice-oriented model of parent involvement that embraces parents' sense of agency, an asset orientation to families, culturally relevant pedagogy, an equitable distribution of resources, and parents' democratic and collective participation in their children's education (p. 117). The model requires that teachers and parents

acknowledge the contexts that families and schools are functioning in and work through existing power differentials.

Greene shows the power of the model in his final stories about parents' agency in action. In one story, the parents and Greene wrote letters to an editor of a local newspaper and to the superintendent of public instruction. The newspaper had printed a story assigning blame for children's failure on state tests to parents who did not care about education, along with a comment from the state superintendent threatening to take over the district. In their response letters, the parents outlined the resources they felt their children and schools needed in order to increase academic success. In another story, Greene shows how parents began being more active in the school. During their weekly meetings, parents initiated conversations about challenging topics such as school behavior issues. In these discussions, the parents respectfully challenged each other's opinions and collectively created plans of action for change.

Greene concludes with suggestions about the nature of parent involvement and recommendations for creating what he calls "spaces of hope" (p.126) in which teachers and parents develop deep understandings about each other's beliefs, practices, and histories. While these suggestions are sound and inspiring, the reader might wonder how parents and teachers cultivate truly reciprocal relationships. The suggestions offered by Greene could be strengthened by being put in conversation with research that deals with the difficulty of breaking down teacher held stereotypes and teaching teachers to recognize the practices of marginalized families. That being said, such a task seems to be outside of the scope of this particular book.

Readers of *Race, Community and Urban Schools* will gain an authentic representation of low-income African American family involvement, insight into how societal structures influence home-school relationships, and ideas about how to reimagine parent/teacher relationships. Greene's counternarratives and thoughtful reflections make a powerful impact that leaves the reader with an impassioned sense of hope for change in schools, making the book an excellent choice for pre-service and in-service educators. He enriches conversations about people's lived experiences and his attention to children's perspectives is a needed addition to home-school relationships literature. Greene's ecological approach with a focus on race provides a contextualized look at individual and community experiences over time, bringing deeper understandings to how the past shapes the present and possibilities for African American families' experiences with schools in the future.

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