Book Reviews

***The Broken Compass: Parental Involvement with Children's Education, b*y Keith Robinson & Angel L. Harris Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014, 312 pages.**

On April 12, 2014 an opinion piece authored by Keith Robinson and Angel L. Harris, authors of the book *The Broken Compass*, appeared on the New York Times blog website *The Opinionator*. The opinion piece titled "Parental Involvement is Overrated," suggested that the evidence supporting parental involvement as a means of improving children's academic lives has been overstated. In fact, it made the claim that "most forms of parental involvement . . . do not improve student achievement" at all and "in some cases" it may "actually hinder it."

The piece immediately became a lightning rod of controversy. Parent involvement advocates and researchers were dismayed that education researchers would be making such an assertion. What exactly were these scholars proposing? That parents not be involved at all? To respond to these questions, one needs to read Robinson and Harris' book *The Broken Compass: Parental Involvement with Children's Education* in order to understand that these scholars are not advocating against parental involvement at all. Rather, they are challenging educators and policymakers to reconsider their one-size-fits-all notions when it comes to parental involvement in schools, particularly the manner in which they conceptualize the involvement of non-white and working-class parents. Specifically, they are asking education professionals to redirect their energies toward promoting relationships, activities, and practices that take in to consideration issues of social class and race.

The authors begin the book by problematizing one of the main premises that support parental involvement in schools: that parental involvement increases academic achievement. They argue that by linking "involved" parents to academic achievement and high-achieving students, the unspoken contrary becomes that parents of low-achieving students are uninvolved, incompetent, and uncaring. They write,

> Overall, parents who are active participants in their child's education are thought to promote children's social, emotional, and academic growth . . . The importance placed on parental involvement by educators is guided by their belief that poor achievement results from lack of involvement or valuing of schools on the part of parents (p. 2).

This important statement brings to the forefront underlying assumptions and biases that are embedded in our public school system concerning working–class, minority parents—that their children's underachievement can be attributed to ineffective or incongruent parenting.

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Robinson and Harris are concerned that placing such importance on parental involvement as the means for improving the academic achievement of minority students ignores equally influential factors—namely, social class bias and racism in schools (and society). Furthermore, they raise questions as to "which aspects of involvement actually improve achievement for minority students" (pp. 19–20). In other words, parental involvement is a broad umbrella term that has multiple definitions and numerous behaviors associated with it, so exactly which behavior is responsible for increasing academic achievement? Additionally, parental involvement is experienced and expressed differently by different communities. That is, "all forms of parent involvement in public schools are *not* the same, nor are all parents treated equally by school authorities" (Italics in original) (Olivos, Jiménez-Castellanos, & Ochoa, 2011, p. 2). Therefore, which behaviors are looked favorably upon by school officials and which ones are frowned up when exhibited by low-income, minority parents (Shannon, 1996)?

To examine these complex issues, the authors develop a guiding conceptual framework for the book (p. 21). The purpose of this framework is to find links between "parental involvement and achievement by social class . . . and race" (p. 22). Subsequent chapters break down the framework as the authors delve more deeply into parental involvement at home and at school by social class (education and income level), and by race. The authors carefully break up the category of race the best they can (given the data) beyond black and white to include Asians and Hispanics. Understanding the broad diversity that exists in the latter two racial/ethnic categories, the authors then create two Asian groups (Asians A and Asians B). The "former category comprises groups that are commonly considered part of the 'model minority,' the latter group comprises socioeconomically disadvantaged Asian groups" (p. 100). Similarly, the authors extract Mexicans from the Hispanics group and create two groups, Mexicans and non-Mexicans. The authors acknowledge the imperfect nature of these classifications but use them with the stated purpose of better examining "within-group differences that may be masked by aggregation" (p. 100).

The authors use the majority of the book to present findings and conclusions using four different data sets. As a quantitative study, this book is indeed heavy on statistics, formulas, numbers, correlations, charts, and graphs. The book contains over 70 figures and multiple tables. Yet each chapter breaks up parental involvement into distinct categories and searches for associations, the end results are multiple parental involvement outcomes. When examining the "effects" of parental involvement by race, for example, the authors examine the link between twenty-seven (27) measures to three outcomes (Reading, Math, and Grades) among 6 different racial/ethnic groups (white, black, non-Mexican, Mexican, Asian A, and Asian B). The results are often a hodgepodge of negative associations or non-significant ones (these tend to be the majority). In some cases, the findings also appear to be random, leading the reader to ponder how policy and/or practice can be drawn from this inconclusiveness. One finding, for example, found that "reading to children is associated with increases in both reading and math for white youth and in reading for Hispanic youth. In contrast, helping with homework is associated with declines in both reading and math for whites and Hispanics" (p. 121).

While the book is heavily laden with statistical data it contains a rich literature review that includes a thoughtful examination of social class and race making this study different from other quantitative studies we have read. The authors, for example, delve into the literature of economic

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capital, cultural capital, and social capital when examining social class. Drawing on well-known and highly respected thinkers such as Annette Lareau and Pierre Bourdieu, they use this literature to nuance their findings, in attempts to explain why "some forms of parental involvement might be beneficial to the achievement of youth in one group, but be detrimental to the achievement of youth who belong to the other group" (p. 81). Similarly, the authors provide a critique of the way parental involvement becomes racialized, particularly in the manner in which a positive academic orientation is attributed to either white or Asian A parents, while the opposite is attributed to the involvement of Hispanic and black parents. Yet, their findings show "that Hispanic and black parents do value schooling and are generally just as involved in their children's education as white parents" (p.107).

One of the primary concepts advocated by Robinson and Harris is "stage setting" for minority families. The authors define stage setting as a form of involvement that emphasizes the influence of parents by encouraging and promoting their children's educational journey through a public school system heavily influenced by class and racial bias. It involves having "supportive parents" who "convey the importance of school" and help children "adopt an academic identity" (pp. 201-205). These practices are seen as countering low-expectations and "stereotype threat" (p. 207). The authors differentiate between "stage setting" and "traditional parental involvement" by noting that the former moves beyond minority parents being engaged in activities that may (or may not) foster academic achievement to including two supports important for minority student success in schools: messages and life space (p. 210). For example, while parents have limited control to the exterior environment their child navigates, they have plenty of control of their child's life space within the home. The authors stipulate that parents "can control the physical space in ways that can reinforce or convey about the relative importance of school" (p. 208).

The Broken Compass can be a bit of a difficult read for those not comfortable with reading quantitative studies, and there is a tendency for the authors' main contributions to get lost amongst all the data, numbers, tables, etc. Yet, Robinson and Harris are simply asking educators and policymakers to tone down their messages and to recognize that parental involvement in schools moves beyond the dichotomy that says involved parents equals successful children, while uninvolved parents do not. They are asking their readers to consider the gray areas, the nuances that exist in the social world of education. So, "when asked if parent involvement is critical for academic success, the answer depends on the form of involvement and the social class or racial group in question" (p. 25). In other words, a one-size-fits-all mentality about parental involvement obfuscates the complexity of how working-class and low-income minority parents interact with schools and how school authorities respond to them. Furthermore, it assumes that the only forms of "good" involvement take place at schools, when in fact, for minority parents, who may feel marginalized from their children's schools, their best work occurs at home. Educators, however, often fail to recognize this.

Robinson and Harris' stated goal for this book is to "provide an in-depth examination of the association between parental involvement and academic outcomes" (p. 20) yet the book provides more than that. It provides a thoughtful critique of underlying assumptions and biases that permeate the field and practice of parental involvement in schools. Ultimately, what the *The Broken Compass* uncovers is that two vital issues must be addressed by the educational community if we

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are to make claims about the effectiveness of parental involvement in schools: "(1) . . . which involvement activities work best for each racial/ethnic group, and (2) . . . why particular activities work for certain groups" (p. 230). It is an excellent study that raises powerful questions around the role parents play in their children's education.

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R**eferences:**

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