

## **Is the Compass Broken or Did the Navigators Err?**

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Keith Robinson and Angel L. Harris recently published a book titled *The Broken Compass* in which they allegedly demonstrate that parent involvement rarely helps and more often hinders students' achievement in school. As identified in this editorial, basic conceptual, methodological, and analytical flaws in their study severely limit any conclusions that can be drawn about the role of parent involvement in education. In this brief essay, I will highlight some of the problems with their work. Time and space do not allow a complete point-by-point rebuttal. Counterexamples illustrate broader criticisms and are only a few of many possible examples.

Analyses from four large, publicly available data sets were presented and interpreted in the book. The first data set utilized was the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS88), which began following students in eighth grade. In the analyses presented in the book, parent involvement and achievement control variables came from wave 1 (Grade 8) and outcomes from wave 3 (Grade 12). They also used the more recent Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS,  $N = 15,362$ ), which began following students in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Their third source was the Child Development Supplement (CDS) to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (CDS Wave 1 = 3,563 & CDS Wave 2 = 2,908 families). Wave 1 focused on children between 0 and 12 years of age, so a considerable number of preschool children were included; Wave 2 follow-up achievement data were collected five years later. Finally, they used the Maryland Adolescent Development in Context Study which followed 1,407 Black and White students residing on the Eastern Seaboard of the U.S. from middle school entry to beyond high school.

## **Parent Involvement as a Major Focus of Educational Policy?**

In the introduction to the book, Robinson and Harris argue that enormous policy efforts and resources have been expended on parent involvement in an attempt to solve our nation's educational underachievement problems. Their evidence consists of politicians' speeches (see pp. 3–4) and both the Improve America's Schools Act (IASA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB; see p. 18). In fact, policy initiatives to promote parent involvement in education have been modest at best. IASA and NCLB have mandated parent involvement in schools attended by low-income students through Title I, which requires schools receiving more than half a million dollars in federal Title I funds to spend at least one percent of their Part A allocation on parent involvement (including any funds expended on family literacy and basic parenting initiatives). With 99% of Title I funds directed elsewhere, and given that not all schools receive Title I funds, this hardly constitutes substantial policy-driven effort or resources for parent involvement. Thus, despite political rhetoric about the importance of parent involvement, substantial federal educational policy efforts and resources have not been showered upon promoting parent involvement in schooling.

## **Failure to Review Relevant Literature**

A deeply troubling aspect of the book is the failure of the authors to adequately review the extensive interdisciplinary literature on parent involvement. Had they done so, they might have planned, conducted, and interpreted their study differently. Scholars from multiple disciplines are interested in why, how, and to what effect parents are involved in their children's education, and these multiple perspectives are critical in understanding how parent involvement matters to students' school success. Robinson and Harris's contention that little is known and/or that there are widely conflicting results in the existing literature is simply not correct. Google scholar returns 1,200 results for the search terms "NELS 88" and "parent involvement." Some of those papers are consistent with the findings they present in the book as novel (e.g., high expectations are positively associated with student outcomes, associations differ by SES and race/ethnicity, and homework help is negatively associated with achievement) while others contradict them, probably because those studies tied parent involvement to outcomes in the same school year (see analytical concerns below for possible reasons).

The authors' failure to adequately review the literature results in a poorly conceptualized study. One example pertains to their analyses of parent involvement with homework, about which there is a sizable literature. Several

important studies about parent involvement with homework were overlooked. One was that of Harris Cooper and his colleagues, experts on homework, whose meta-analysis (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008) indicated that the impact of parent involvement with homework depends on a number of factors including students' grade level (with different results found between elementary, middle, and high school), the academic subject of the homework (with different results for mathematics homework and verbal subject homework), and the type of help provided. These factors are not reflected in the analyses conducted by Robinson and Harris, who lump 6<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> grade students together and fail to distinguish between the academic subjects of the homework or whether there was a program in place to support parents.

Another example comes from their decision to exclude specific types of parenting from consideration, arguing that they “focus only on activities that require parents to directly communicate the importance of schooling to their child” (p. 21). They explicitly and intentionally leave out parenting styles. In so doing, they miss a critically important aspect of parenting by which parents are known to influence their children's school success, especially during adolescence (the preponderance of their sample). Laurence Steinberg and his colleagues (and others) have demonstrated that, across most ecological niches, parenting styles are strongly associated with adolescents' school success. A critically important insight from his series of studies was that the expression and meaning of parent involvement practices differs depending on the context created by those parenting styles. The findings were so compelling that Steinberg wrote a trade book with his colleagues (1996) to inform parents about them. Somewhat inexplicably, after having rejected it as irrelevant in the introduction, Robinson and Harris do return to the idea of parenting style as a response to poor achievement in Chapter 9. Importantly, given the extensive prior literature on this topic, they never consider whether the impact of parental behavioral involvement on student outcomes was moderated by parenting style.

### **Correlation vs Causation**

It is striking how thoroughly Robinson and Harris seem to have forgotten a fundamental principle: Correlation is not causation. Although they often describe findings as associations, they repeatedly slip into causal language when discussing implications of their results, such as on page 60 where they write that “some forms of involvement that parents can employ outside of school might actually *lead to* (italics added) declines in achievement.” Forms of parent involvement they trumpet as decreasing student achievement include help with homework (Grades 1-12), reading to the child (Grades 6-12), and con-

ferences with the principal or meetings with the counselor (Grades 1-12). In each of these cases, the direction of effects can, and likely do, operate in the other direction—a fact they do not acknowledge. For example, common sense and evidence both suggest that parents help more with homework when the child is struggling (Shumow & Miller, 2001). Similarly, parents who are reading to children past the primary grades are likely doing so because the student has a serious reading problem. As well, most educators will readily notice that parents most often meet with a school principal or counselor because there is a serious problem.

Robinson and Harris conclude that parents are apparently ineffective at helping their children with homework and suggest that “parents need guidance on how to be more effective and thus avoid compromising achievement.” But that is nothing new. Researchers have addressed the question of whether interventions help parents supervise and help with homework. Some evidence of the impact of such intervention comes from *ex post facto* and meta-analytic studies. An evaluation of practices within schools in the National Network of Partnership Schools founded by Dr. Joyce Epstein indicated that how well schools implemented an interactive homework program was related to mathematics achievement test scores (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Meta-analyses of the effectiveness of parent involvement practices (Nye, Turner, & Schwartz, 2006) found that interventions to help parents guide homework ranked among the best practices for increasing student achievement, although that impact is tempered during middle school (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

The gold standard in educational research, and the only means by which we can attribute causation, is experimental design. Numerous small, carefully designed quasi-experimental studies have, in fact, demonstrated that theoretically and/or empirically grounded interventions that utilize family and community funds of knowledge or that provide parents with the information and resources they need to be involved in effective ways do result in more effective involvement and better student outcomes. An example comes from the interactive homework Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork program designed by Epstein and her colleagues. Middle school students participating in the TIPS program achieved more in writing and science (but not math) than students who did not participate (see Epstein & VanVoorhis, 2001, p. 188; Van Voorhis, 2003). Another comes from my 1998 study that tested two interventions that focused on parents of second graders and mathematics homework.

## **Measurement of Parent Involvement**

Many of the measures of parent involvement utilized by Robinson and Harris are so general as to be riddled with error. For instance, the sole measure of

homework help is a single item (see pp. 260, 261), and the vast majority of parent involvement variables are measured on a two-point response scale: yes/no, none/more than once, not often/often. This would be akin to a study of the impact of 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers on student achievement in 12<sup>th</sup> grade which asked the teacher, “How often did you help a given student with their work?” with a possible response of either “none” or “more than once.” What could we possibly learn about improving teaching or long-term student achievement from that without knowing how, when, why, what kind of work, for how long, and under what conditions? To be fair, the authors do say that their results point to the need for a more careful examination of what happens, but that need has been previously recognized. Well-designed studies, preferably with control groups and homework observations, are indeed needed to understand how to support parents in helping their children. One reason we lack large-scale studies of this kind is that federal research funding priorities (IES, NSF, NICHD) have not targeted parent involvement.

### Analytical Issues

Robinson and Harris rely upon standard regression models as their analytical method. It is important to describe the components of those equations because few people seem to understand what specifically they did. Focusing on the analyses by social class in Chapters 2–4, the impact of parent involvement on achievement is tested as follows. A single item of a very complex process variable (the parent involvement indicator) is used to explain another very complex outcome variable (reading or mathematics achievement) *years later*, with no measure of parent involvement concurrently or in the interim. For example, whether or not a parent belonged to the PTA (or talked about school experiences or helped with homework) when their child was *in 8<sup>th</sup> grade* was used to predict achievement test scores *in 12<sup>th</sup> grade*, controlling for achievement in eighth grade and a socioeconomic status (SES) covariate (see p. 249). Separate equations were estimated for each indicator of the nearly 20 kinds of parent involvement. As such, the results are about how parent involvement in 8<sup>th</sup> grade alone predicts 12<sup>th</sup> grade achievement. In the case of analyses predicting achievement in Grades 1–5, reading to the child, homework help, discussing school activities, discussing school experiences, and discussing school studies five years previously (when almost the entire sample was not yet in formal school and some were infants and toddlers) were used as predictors in separate regression equations. It is difficult to understand how these findings are meaningful or how widespread implications for policy or practice in schools can be based on them.

### **Moderators**

In his seminal theoretical work, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) wrote, “In ecological research, the principal main effects are likely to be interactions” (p. 38). The central questions in this study and questions that should have been asked—but were not—pertain to moderation (do results differ by group or by circumstance) and, as such, need to have been tested with interaction terms. For instance, the interaction between parent education and students’ simultaneous achievement could have been used to predict parent involvement. It is difficult to understand why separate equations were estimated for each level of parent education or income without first testing the interaction term. Second, rather than simply controlling for prior achievement in examining the effect of a particular form of parent involvement on achievement, the interactions between parent education, prior achievement, and parent involvement would tell us much more than those presented.

### **Mediators: Direct vs Indirect Effects**

In order for the educational community to understand parent involvement in a way that will help us to design partnerships with parents that benefit children, it is essential to understand how context and process operate to influence one another and student outcomes. Indeed, many scholars have been building and testing models in an attempt to understand these paths. Kathy Hoover-Dempsey is a notable example (see, e.g., Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Yet, Robinson and Harris chose to focus only on direct effects and, in so doing, missed an opportunity to advance our understanding. To illustrate: Robinson and Harris find, as have many others (Fan, 2001; Jeynes, 2010; NELS88; Seginer, 1983), that parents’ educational expectations are associated with school success. But what does this tell us? Perhaps parent expectations result from messages the parent has received about their child from the school. In that case, expectations are predicted by rather than predictive of student success. Maybe parental expectations drive the choices parents make about time use, resource allocation, and involvement (in ways not captured by dichotomous variables). Or perhaps parents communicate their expectations in a way that influence students’ beliefs, values, motivation, and goal structures resulting in deeper student engagement and effort in school which, in turn, drive academic success. Maybe these processes operate jointly or differently across contexts. The extent to which these conjectures are correct matter in terms of what parents and schools can do with that knowledge. Further, these conjectures can and have been tested through various forms of path analysis. Given previous theoretical and empirical work to build upon, data sets that support path modeling, and

potential contributions of results to decisions about educational practice, it is unclear why the authors chose their simplistic and ultimately unilluminating approach.

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