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Robinson, K., & Harris, A. L. (2014). *The broken compass: Parental involvement with children's education*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

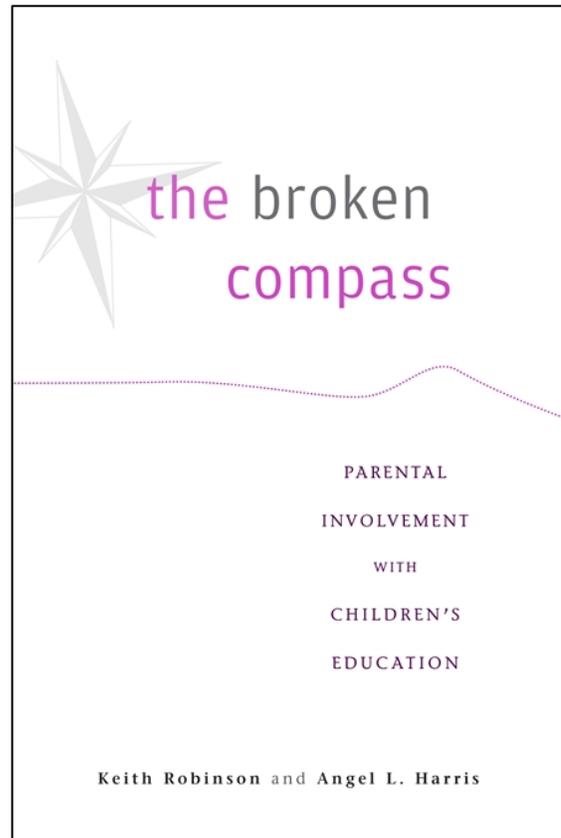
Pp. 312

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As the parent of four children, as well as a former teacher, I have done my best to be involved in my children's education, from attending parent teacher conferences, to helping with homework, to volunteering in the classroom. The authors of *The Broken Compass: Parental Involvement with Children's Education*, wouldn't be surprised by this, noting that most people believe that parent involvement in schools is "critical to improving educational outcomes for all children" (2014, p. 1). Yet the authors question whether the research really supports all of those efforts. Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) and the Child Development Supplement (CDS) to the Panel Study for Income Dynamics, Robinson and Harris set out to determine if common means of parental involvement specifically associated with schooling (such as talking with students about educational values, and engagement with schools and teachers) are associated with improved test scores in both math and reading.

Setting aside the obvious concern of relegating all of education to a select few tests taken in a student's career, the overall concept was an



interesting one. As is detailed in the first couple of chapters, schools, foundations, and various government agencies are spending a tremendous amount of money to encourage parents to be more involved with their student's schooling. Is it worth it? Are some forms of parenting involvement better than other forms, and if so, which ones? Does this vary by class and by race? These are the questions the two sociology professors sought to answer.

To find answers to these questions, statistical analyses using linear regressions were performed on the various forms of parental involvement and their correlation to the math and reading test scores. Robinson and Harris considered both transmission of beliefs and values about education, such as discussing educational experiences, high school plans, course selection and school activities, as well as school contact, participation in school events such as PTO, and meeting with teachers. Each of the parental involvement factors were then broken down by race and by social class, further delineating their findings. They then took an added step and looked at how many (and what percent) of the factors were related to increases on the scores, and which were related to decreases. While the last step is perhaps a bit of an arbitrary way of analyzing the data, since grouping many factors into one number dilutes the overall meaning, up to this point, the analysis is clear and well delivered. Using a variety of graphs, one can easily see the analysis breakdown and determine correlation between various parenting factors.

However, and this is a big however, the authors then go on to mistake correlation for causation. For example, they state that, "educators should be aware that some forms of involvement that parents can employ outside of the school can lead to declines in achievement" (p. 60, emphasis added). This confusion between correlation and causation results in large misunderstandings throughout the text, implying that since some forms of parent involvement are associated with lower scores, that there is a resulting causation, meaning that the form of parent involvement caused the lower score. In another case, the authors argue that

while requesting a teacher results in increases in math scores, obtaining information about the teacher or meeting with the teacher causes math scores to decline. Instead, it is more likely that there is a confounding variable at play here. Perhaps parents whose children were doing poorly in math were more likely to seek out and meet a teacher in an effort to help their student.

These types of mistakes continue to be made throughout the book. For example, the authors found only one method of parental involvement that showed positive impacts for all grade and all students: “[Y]outh whose parents are contacted by schools about fund-raising have higher math achievement than those whose parents are not contacted about fund-raising” (p. 81). This is completely illogical to suggest that somehow contacting parents about a money related concern will somehow produce students who get better scores on a math test, and yet the authors make that, and similar arguments. In another case, the authors say that, “It seems that in general, parents can do more to increase their children’s achievement by focusing on post-high school education (either through conversations or expectations), than they can by helping with homework or setting rules about homework or grade point averages” (p. 126).

As the book continues, the authors continue to provide more reasons for causality between the forms of parental involvement and the resulting test scores. Perhaps the most insulting to parents is the idea that, “educators should consider the possibility that negative estimates for some forms of involvement might reflect an ineffective or flawed mode of implementation of the given form of involvement” and then, “some of these measures might actually be beneficial for achievement if parents made adjustments in how they employ the behavior described by the parental involvement measure” (p. 127).

Throughout the book, Robinson and Harris cite numerous studies, and results from prior research efforts. Yet, they seem to support some works, such as Lareau’s study of parenting styles (2011) while downplaying others, such as Bourdieu’s idea of social capital (1989). Toward

the end of the book, the authors, reflecting on their own educational experiences, note that, “we recalled that our parents did very few of the activities we discussed in this book, yet they were instrumental to our own academic success” (p. 199). With this in mind, the authors decide to conduct a set of focus groups with a total of sixty students from the University of Michigan to ask them in what ways their parents supported their educational efforts. With no mention of the breakdown of the group in terms of race or gender, Robinson and Harris found that university students mentioned four key attributes about their parents that contributed to their success. Students described their parents as being supportive, helping them get into a good school, conveying the importance of school, and being identified by their parents as, ‘the smart one.’ Declaring these attributes to be the ones necessary to ‘set the stage’ for success, the authors make a rather provocative statement about parenting: “Once the stage is set for academic success, children are on course toward being academically successful” (p. 219). This statement does a huge disservice to students of color and those who live in poverty. There are many other factors determining our students’ outcomes such as the development of social networks (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) that go well beyond parents who ‘set the stage’ for academic success.

Overall, while the research culminates in a significant set of data, the authors’ analysis remains flawed and potentially harms the work done so far to engage parents in their children’s education. Because the negative correlation between test scores and some parental factors varied greatly between races and across socioeconomic lines, Robinson and Harris advocate for reducing the emphasis on parent involvement and instead look to ‘stage setting’ as the means of improving student success. Unfortunately, I do not believe that it is that easy. Stage setting completely discounts the effects of social capital, and other benefits of privilege that play a key role in how many of those parents are able to help their students attend a top university.

The real value to this book will be the discussions that come after reading it. Educators

and researchers need to review the data, challenge the results, and where needed, do the additional research to determine actual causality. In the meantime, parents should continue to be involved in their children's education – despite their findings, it's not time yet to change our heading on that compass.

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Susan Miller left a career in engineering to teach math to middle school students for eight years before deciding to currently pursue a doctoral degree in the School of Education, at the University of Colorado Boulder. Specializing in math curriculum and instruction, her research interests include math teacher education and the use of computational thinking to support mathematizing. She also co-parents four children from 15 to 22 years old.



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