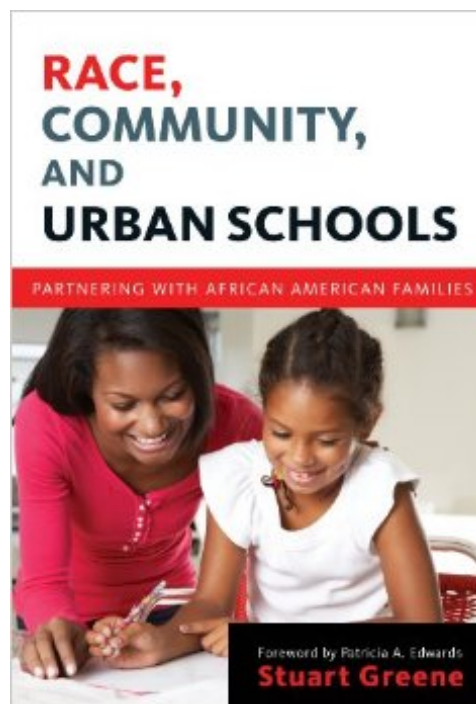


Review of Race, Community, and Urban Schools: Partnering with African American Families

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There is a common misconception that the parents of children who attend struggling schools are to blame for the academic failings of their children. The dominant discourse that surrounds urban schools emphasizes a collective disinvestment, yet typically points the finger at teachers and parents in particular. In *Race, Community and Urban Schools*, Stuart Greene uses a collection of counter-narratives from students, parents, teachers, and administrators to address the onslaught of the dominant discourse. For those of us who spend time in urban schools, the daily contradictions to the persistent stereotypes to which we bear witness are captured in this book, and disseminated to those who might have never had the pleasure of truly experiencing life in a similar educational space.

Greene, a professor of English at the University of Notre Dame, is able to shift the blame away from a perceived cultural deficit to a structural model of societal disparity that is the result of decades of inequitable capital distribution and schooling practices levied upon minority communities (Anyon, 2005; Bourdieu, 1993; Rothstein, 2004). Greene argues that the stereotype of disinterested, unwilling, and incapable minority parents living in deteriorating neighborhoods undermines the construction of necessary partnerships between parents and schools, and ignores the various ways parents support the academic development of their children.

Firmly situated in the traditions of Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1987; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005) and Critical Geography (Harvey, 2007; Soja, 2010), *Race, Community and Urban Schools*, explores how race and space have been used to structurally disadvantage families of color. Examining the ecological context of urban schools, families, and communities, Greene builds a rich description of literacy development and agency formation. Greene uses observations and interviews to illustrate how parents living in a Midwestern American city activate their agency in order to create fertile ground for their children to become engaged readers. Greene, focuses his gaze on how parents make education, and in particular literacy, a priority in the lives of their children. Greene

balances the expectations of the school with regard to parent involvement with the student and parent narratives, to deliver an authentic perspective of how parents engage their children and support literacy both inside and outside of school.

Race, Community and Urban Schools has five chapters in total. Chapters One through Three are structured around teacher, parent, and student narratives relating to parental engagement in literacy development. Chapters Four and Five are used to discuss the history of discriminatory educative practices levied against African Americans and to re-imagine schools and urban communities as hopeful spaces of opportunity. The data collected for *Race, Community and Urban Schools*, came from multiple sources, much of which originated from a collaborative participatory action research project, that included faculty members, local principals, and a community center administrator who live and/or work in a Midwestern American city.

This community-based coalition helped design and implement research initiatives within an economically disadvantaged neighborhood. Proceeding from the work of the community coalition, interviews were conducted with a range of educational stakeholders and participants. In total, in-depth interviews were conducted with two school administrators, 11 teachers, 17 parents, and 26 students (Grades Four, Five, and Six). These semi-structured interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to one hour and included follow-up questions and prompts for elaboration. Additionally, parents participated in focus groups and were also engaged in occasional informal conversations with researchers over a two-year period of data collection. Appendices A-E provide a thorough description of the research methodologies used in Chapters One through Three.

Fully aware of his own power and privilege, Greene provides a thoughtful subjectivity statement that shows his understanding of researcher positionality and influence. Though his consistent presence in the lives of the participating families has at times placed him in the role of advocate, he is comfortable fulfilling the associated duties as he

sees himself as an intricate part of the research, and more importantly, a part of the community. Built on the foundation of trusting and respectful relationships, the author is able to simultaneously answer his research questions about parent involvement, as well as open up lines of communication between various educational stakeholders who can collectively enact positive change for students. The collective investment of researchers, parents, and teachers allows for racial and class boundaries to be transcended and the goal of thriving students to be realized.

A grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was taken in the interpretation and analysis of the interview data. Greene (2013) states, "I read all of the transcripts, wrote narratives that captured the individual differences among the parents' life histories and approaches to parent involvement, and then merged my analyses to develop categories" (p. 133). A similar approach was also taken with the teacher interviews, as the author constructed narratives from the interview data, coded the data thematically, and selected illustrative examples for inclusion in the final text. In Chapter Three, where the prominent voices are those of children, Greene used four cases as exemplars of the larger sample (n=26). However, the author wrote individual narratives for all 26 student participants, compared the data collectively, and established a larger constructed meta-narrative that was drawn from consistent themes found throughout both parent and student responses. This collective depiction of parental involvement then served as the common voice running throughout the book.

Chapter 4 stood out in particular as it included not only parents' voices but more importantly, their educational legacies. It was this chapter that galvanized the entirety of the book by illustrating how parents were committed to the process of educating their children despite their own negative experiences in school. It is apparent that "(p)arents' biographies provide insight into their own experiences in school; the value they place on their children's education, particularly the purposes that literacy and learning serve; and the roles they construct for themselves" (Greene, 2013, p. 94).

The narratives drew on the sad history of minority education in the United States and alluded to the "education debt," or the result of structural inequalities present in urban areas that contribute to a cumulative disadvantage for students of color, that scholars like Ladson-Billings address within the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (2006). As one parent characterized so deftly in Chapter Four while discussing the conversations she has had with her child, "What we talk about mostly is breaking the cycle" (p. 89). To that end, Greene uses the remainder of the book to conceptualize what he refers to as "spaces of hope" (p. 126), or collaborative efforts to bring about progress in urban communities, taking a critical look at the power connected to space (Soja, 2010).

The diverse narratives interwoven throughout *Race, Community and Urban Schools*, create a solid foundation for reconceptualizing parental involvement within and beyond the walls of struggling urban schools. This book establishes a model for change and a substantial counter-narrative to the dominant discourse that undervalues the contributions parents make to literacy development in minority populated urban neighborhoods. This book stands as an excellent resource for parents, community activists, pre-service and in-service teachers, educational administrators, and researchers who care about school and family partnerships. *Race, Community and Urban Schools*, serves as an interdisciplinary text that makes a substantial contribution to multiple fields of inquiry. The subject matter of *Race, Community and Urban Schools* is timely yet unfortunately familiar, as the perpetuation of negative stereotypes aimed at minorities, along with subversive educational practices, have existed for decades.

One area that is lacking in this book is a thorough discussion of how these negative stereotypes gained traction and became part of the fabric of the dominant narrative relating to urban schools. It is somewhat implied that the miscommunication or lack of communication between various educational stakeholders was partially responsible, but there seems to be room for further

investigation and discussion of the dissemination of misrepresentative notions regarding parental involvement and engagement. Though the subject matter of this book is not entirely new, Greene contributes fresh perspectives and valuable insights worthy of being included as oppositional evidence against ignorant and inaccurate perceptions of urban schools and neighborhoods.

Greene's work provides an outlet for the voices of those who have too often been muted, spoken for, or shouted down. The layered narratives from parents, students, teachers, and administrators

construct a model for change that establishes open and equal lines of communication pursuant to the common goals of student literacy, hope, and success. Greene emphasizes that these goals are not, and should not be, racially or economically exclusive. This book stands to bridge the gap between home and school educative practices by unveiling the contributions made both professionally and personally by all those committed to the teaching of children. The lesson this book provides is one that I will continue to draw on as I seek to create safe educational spaces with my fellow educational stakeholders.

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