



# A New Framework for Understanding Parental Involvement: Setting the Stage for Academic Success

ANGEL L. HARRIS AND KEITH ROBINSON

*The Coleman Report posited that the inequality of educational opportunity appears to stem from the home itself and the cultural influences immediately surrounding the home. However, this line of inquiry assumes that school and home processes operate in isolation, which is often not the case. An example of how families and schools can reinforce one another is through parental involvement. Whereas some studies suggest that children have better achievement outcomes when their parents are involved in their education, other studies challenge the link between parental involvement and academic outcomes. One major reason for this lack of consensus among scholars is that parents' involvement has been measured differently across studies. Thus, scholars' disagreements about how parents should be involved and about which aspects of parental involvement are associated with improvements in children's academic outcomes have contributed to inconsistent findings. We argue that the mixed results observed in previous studies indicate that parental involvement does not operate through the typical channels posited by researchers, educators, and policymakers and that traditional measures of parental involvement fail to capture the fundamental ways in which parents help their children academically. We propose a framework of parental involvement that might provide some clarity on how parental involvement operates.*

**Keywords:** parental involvement, academic achievement

The Coleman Report states that “the sources of inequality of educational opportunity appear to lie first in the home itself and the cultural influences immediately surrounding the home” (Coleman et al. 1966, 73–74). The findings of James Coleman and his colleagues suggest that nonschool factors such as family and neighborhood characteristics are more conse-

quential for student outcomes than school factors. However, proceeding with this line of inquiry assumes that school and home processes operate in isolation. As Karl Alexander notes elsewhere in this issue, this “school versus family framing” does not account for the ways in which families, schools, and neighborhoods matter for youth outcomes, both separately

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We want to thank Danielle Allen, Paul Attewell, Rob Crosnoe, Janeria Dunlap, Linsey Edwards, Tod Hamilton, Mark Hayward, Bob Hummer, Sara McLanahan, Seth Moglen, Chandra Muller, Kelly Raley, and Marcelo and Carola Suarez-Orozco. We would not have been able to complete this project without the generosity of the Institute for Advanced Study or without “STEM in the New Millennium: Preparation, Pathways, and Diversity,” a grant funded by the National Science Foundation (DUE-0757018) to Chandra Muller and Catherine Riegle-Crumb. Direct correspondence to: Angel Harris at angel.harris@duke.edu, Duke University, Department of Sociology, Soc/Psych Building, 417 Chapel Dr., Durham, NC 27708; and Keith Robinson at keithdion@gmail.com.

and together. One such example of how families and schools can reinforce one another is through parental involvement.

The notion that parents play a key role in children's educational success has become conventional wisdom, and parental involvement in children's schooling has been a major component of school reform efforts and federal education policies over the last two decades (Comer 1992; Epstein 1985). For example, the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 proposed to afford "parents meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at home and at school," and one of the six aims of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was to increase parental involvement (section 1118).

Decades of research generally support the conclusion that children have better achievement outcomes when parents are involved in their education (Domina 2005; Muller 1995, 1998; Sui-Chu and Willms 1996). However, not all studies confirm a link between parental involvement and academic outcomes (Izzo et al. 1999; Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack 2007), and others suggest that parents sometimes initiate involvement as a response to their children's academic difficulties (Catsambis 2001; Desimone 2001). Furthermore, though numerous researchers have focused on variation in parental involvement in children's education (Domina 2005; Jeynes 2003; Stein and Thor-kildsen 1999; Zellman and Waterman 1998), scholars disagree about how parents should be involved and which aspects of parental involvement are associated with improvements in children's academic outcomes.

In a recent study that contains nearly every measure of parental involvement used in previous studies—sixty-three in total, across four data sets—and conducted by social class and across six racial groups, we find that there is no clear positive connection between parental involvement and academic outcomes (Robinson and Harris 2014). Specifically, parental involvement was *not* related to achievement in more than half (53 percent) of the 1,556 associations between parental involvement and achievement examined in our study. In fact, there were more negative associations (27

percent) between parental involvement and achievement than positive associations (20 percent). The benefits associated with parental involvement appear to be strongest for younger children (grades 1 to 5), though there are an equal number of positive and negative associations between parental involvement and achievement for children in this group. Furthermore, parental involvement is insufficient for reducing racial differences in achievement. Although a critique can be raised about each measure of involvement and outcome contained in our study, the extensiveness of our approach provides a compelling portrait of the role of parental involvement in children's schooling based on the sheer preponderance of evidence.

It is important to note that there is a lack of consensus among scholars on what constitutes parental involvement in schooling. For example, Dean Hoge, Edna Smit, and John Crist's (1997) conception of involvement entails four components: parental expectations, parental interest, involvement in school, and family and community. Wei-Cheng Mau (1997) claims that the most important involvement measure is parental supervision of homework. Darcy Hango (2007) emphasizes the relational aspect of parents' time with children, primarily because it provides children with the social capital to mediate harmful effects of financial deprivation. Joyce Epstein (2010) summarizes the ranges of family involvement within a classification system that includes school-home communications, parent involvement within the school and community, home learning activities, and parents serving as decision-makers. Moreover, traditional measures of parental involvement often do not capture some very important features of parent behavior that impact youth outcomes, such as vocabulary usage (Hart and Risley 1995). Such conceptual differences contribute to inconsistent findings. Additionally, some studies examine the parental involvement–student achievement link for elementary school children (Dearing and Taylor 2007; Schulting, Malone, and Dodge 2005), whereas others focus on adolescents (McNeal 1999).

We argue that traditional measures of pa-

rental involvement fail to capture the fundamental ways in which parents actually help their children academically. We propose a framework of parental involvement that might provide some clarity on how parental involvement operates. We argue that the mixed results observed in previous studies indicate that parental involvement does not operate through the typical channels posited by researchers, educators, and policymakers. We provide a brief introduction to the framework followed by a discussion of what served as the impetus for the theory. We then elaborate further on the theory and discuss how it might apply to social class and race. We conclude with a discussion of whether the claim in the Coleman Report that inequality of educational opportunity stems primarily from the home and culture is consistent with empirical evidence fifty years later.

### TOWARD A NEW FRAMEWORK OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Several years ago, during a personal conversation, a colleague mentioned that her sibling was enrolled in a prestigious law school. When asked what her parents did to attain such success from their children, she recalled that her parents rarely talked to them about school, did not help with homework, and did not read to them. Despite their lack of involvement, however, her parents had high expectations of them and they knew from an early age that doing well in school was important. Although she was discussing the role her parents played in helping her attain academic success, she could not recall a set of home- or school-based practices her parents employed. This conversation motivated us to explore the types of things parents do that might not be reflected in studies on parental involvement.

We employ the metaphor of “stage-setting” to convey the theory. In theater, stage-setters are responsible for creating a context that allows the cast to successfully enact the performance. Stage-setters create a life space—the parameters within which the actor’s performance occurs—that corresponds with the intended action. Poor stage-setting can compromise an actor’s ability to successfully play a role, thereby leading to a poor performance

because it does not draw the audience into the world intended by the playwright. The stage-setter reinforces the performance at critical transition points, such as between acts. Thus, a good performance can be characterized as a partnership between two critical components: (1) the actor embodying his or her role, and (2) the stage-setter creating and maintaining an environment that reinforces (or does not compromise) the actor’s embodiment of the role. Likewise, many parents construct and manage the social environment around their children in a manner that creates the conditions in which academic success is possible. In our view, this analogy captures what many parents do to position their children for academic success.

This concept stems from focus groups we conducted with students enrolled at a major public university in the Southwest. Students were asked to identify the involvement activities that their parents employed specifically to help them succeed academically (see Robinson and Harris 2014). The focus groups yielded four themes that are helpful for explaining stage-setting. First, students reported that their parents were *supportive*, not just in their schooling but in their extracurricular activities. They interpreted this support as instrumental for their academic success because it effectively communicated that their parents cared about their overall success in life and were not simply imposing pressure on them to perform well academically. They described a type of support that did not involve micromanagement of their academic lives (which can be intrusive or overbearing). Second, students credited their parents with *skillfully navigating school choices* through the K-12 school system. Their parents enrolled them in expensive private schools or made vigorous efforts to enroll them in high-quality public schools. Third, parents *effectively conveyed the importance of school*, often in a manner we thought might lead their children to make academic success central to their purpose in life; for example, if parents had immigrated to the United States seeking better opportunities, their children had come to understand that academic success was the key to such advancement. Their parents also provided clear examples of the undesirable out-

comes of not taking school seriously. Finally, many students recalled being told, “You’re the smart one,” at various points throughout their childhood and adolescence. They regarded this *label of being smart* as particularly important because it motivated them to succeed academically owing primarily to a sense of responsibility to their parents and siblings. This labeling defined an academic identity for them distinct from the identities of their siblings.<sup>1</sup>

Despite not being mutually exclusive, cumulative, or completely related, the four themes provide important context for understanding the role of parents in children’s schooling. Students in the focus groups struggled to identify their parents’ most important involvement *activity* (or activities) that had contributed to their academic success. Many students noted that their parents could not help much with schoolwork beyond fifth grade. Although their expectations for success were high, it bears repeating that these parents conveyed their expectations in ways that would not be considered intrusive or resembling micromanagement. Their children’s difficulty in identifying their involvement activities is a telling point we discuss in the next section.

### STAGE-SETTING

Stage-setting reflects parents’ messages about the importance of schooling and the overall quality of life they create for their children. Although we certainly conceptualize these factors as parental involvement, they are fundamentally distinct from the traditional conception of parental involvement in children’s schooling, such as reading to the child, helping with homework, and meeting with teachers. If parental involvement is conceived of in the traditional manner, then previous research on whether parental involvement “works” is mixed. However, stage-setting is closer to the intangible type of parenting, described by Annette Lareau (2003), that is more about cultivating or enriching the child than effecting a particular academic outcome. For example, activities such as trips to museums and involve-

ment in extracurricular endeavors (such as ballet or piano lessons) are only tangentially about increasing achievement; the benefits of such activities are related to “broadening horizons” rather than earning an A in math.

Stage-setting is a conception of parental involvement with two components: (1) conveying the importance of education to a child, and (2) creating and maintaining an environment or life space in which learning can be maximized (or not compromised). Parents vary in the extent to which they can successfully convey this message and create this life space. For instance, *most* parents express that education is important, yet some parents are able to make this message more central to their children’s frame of reference. Parents’ level of success in conveying the importance of education can be measured by gauging a student’s academic identification: the degree to which academic pursuits and outcomes form the basis for his or her overall self-evaluation, or global self-esteem (Osborne 1997). To sustain school success, a child usually must identify school achievement as a part of his or her self-definition (Steele 1997). It is important to note that the relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement is weaker for black youths, perhaps because they believe that performance evaluations do not reflect their academic abilities and therefore discount them more than do their white peers (Morgan and Mehta 2004). Thus, some groups experience obstacles in maintaining an academic identity, which we discuss later.

In terms of creating a life space conducive to academic success, parents who engage in successful stage-setting are likely to consider the impact of both home and school. At home an ideal learning environment is one in which a child’s basic and essential needs (such as food and shelter) are met. As a result, he or she need not worry about the family’s ability to survive. Whereas the needs of both economically disadvantaged youth and affluent youth might be adequately met, the former are likely to be much more aware of the tenuous nature

1. We would not necessarily suggest motivating children by defining one child’s “smartness” relative to his or her siblings. What seems important is that motivation to do well academically was fostered through the positive labeling and reinforcement given at various points in children’s lives rather than on a daily basis.

of their parents' efforts to meet their needs. At the neighborhood level, an environment conducive to learning is one in which children feel safe and residents enjoy a good quality of life. We elaborate further on each of these stage-setting components in the next sections.

### MESSAGES ABOUT THE VALUE OF SCHOOLING

Although most parents want the best for their children—which in most cases includes some level of academic success—they vary in the degree to which they succeed in conveying the importance of school to their children. Within the context of stage-setting, the difference between conveying that message and *successfully* conveying that message lies in how well the message “sticks”: in the latter case, it becomes a major basis for how children define themselves. Thus, success is entirely measured by how deeply the message about the importance of education is engrained within the child’s identity.

Ideally, students’ global self-esteem (their overall view of the self) is entirely determined by their academic self-concept: they are completely identified with academic success. It is important to note that an individual’s self-concept in a particular domain (such as academic ability) is both conceptually and empirically distinct from that person’s global self-esteem (Marsh 1986; Rosenberg 1979; Rosenberg et al. 1995). A student may evaluate himself negatively in terms of academic ability yet still have positive self-esteem, while another may evaluate herself positively in terms of academic ability and have negative self-esteem (Crocker and Major 1989). In both cases, academic ability is not central to the student’s identity and thus not crucial for his or her overall evalua-

tion of self. Osborne (1997, 728) notes that “students who are more identified with academics should be more motivated to succeed because their self-esteem is directly linked to academic performance. For these students, good performance should be rewarding and poor performance should be punishing.” By contrast, for a student with a low academic identity, there is no contingency between academic outcomes and self-esteem: good performance is not rewarding, and poor performance is not punishing. As such, students who do not identify with academics have little incentive to expend effort in academic endeavors and may focus their efforts elsewhere (that is, on whatever is most consequential for their self-esteem).<sup>2</sup>

Some parents experience external challenges in their efforts to link their children’s academic success to their global self-esteem. Claude Steele (1997, 613) notes that identification with a particular domain requires that one perceives “good prospects in the domain, that is, that one has the interests, skills, resources, and opportunities to prosper there, as well as that one belongs there, in the sense of being accepted and valued in the domain.” He further argues that societal pressures against certain groups “can frustrate this identification; and that in school domains where these groups are negatively stereotyped, those who have become domain identified face the further barrier of stereotype threat, the threat that others’ judgments or their own actions will negatively stereotype them in the domain.” Numerous studies demonstrate that school practices such as differential disciplinary enforcement in school, the privileging of white and middle-class norms (Lareau 2003), and tracking (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Lucas 1999; Tyson 2011) perpetuate group differences and make blacks

2. Academic disidentification is not synonymous with a resistance to schooling. Although students who resist academic success as described by the oppositional culture theory may not identify with schooling, some students may disidentify from academics simply to avoid further feelings of inadequacy or to protect their global self-esteem (Crocker and Major 1989). However, one can disidentify from a particular domain without engaging in active or purposeful resistance within the domain, and while understanding the value associated with success in the domain. For example, an inability to regularly exercise and maintain a healthy diet can lead one to disidentify from both endeavors despite having a strong understanding of the value associated with each of them. For those who disidentify from regular exercise and a healthy diet, their performance in both areas has no bearing on how they feel about themselves in general. Stephen Morgan and Jai Mehta (2004) posit that some mild rejection of performance evaluations can be protective of the sense of self, thereby forestalling a descent into full-blown disidentification.

and Hispanics more susceptible to stereotype threat. In fact, Geoffrey Borman and Jaymes Pyne present findings in this issue suggesting that youth from racial minority groups have been susceptible to stereotype threat since the publication of the Coleman Report.

We argue that whereas most parents convey the importance of education to their children, socioeconomic status partially determines the extent to which the message becomes a central feature of youths' self-definition. Relative to working-class and poor parents, middle-class parents are better able to place their children within contexts that can reinforce the connection between their academic self-esteem and their global self-esteem and minimize those factors that can challenge the centrality of academic success to their self-definition.

#### A LIFE SPACE CONDUCIVE TO LEARNING

The degree to which messages about the importance of education are successfully transmitted also depends on the life space that parents create for their children at home and in the neighborhood. The very space itself may transmit messages that impact children's approach to schooling. Sometimes messages from within the home and the neighborhood conflict with each other. For example, a parent may attempt to link her child's self-esteem with his academic success, but if the family is surrounded by a neighborhood that does not transmit the same message, these efforts at home can be compromised. Thus, identical academic messages from two different sets of parents can result in different levels of academic identity if they live in different types of neighborhoods (say, Beverly Hills versus inner-city Detroit). Not only does the neighborhood context facilitate or hinder parental efforts to convey the importance of academics, but it also serves as an important frame of reference in which to identify the connection between school and children's future self in these spaces.

Parents have greater control of their children's life space inside their home. They can control the physical space in ways that reinforce or convey messages about the relative importance of school. For example, each decision

as to whether to have a television in a child's bedroom, whether to put a desk in the child's bedroom or in a more common area, or whether to have bookshelves in the living room or a home office communicates nonverbally something about the importance of learning. Outside the home, parental control of the life space is limited, mainly to the "selection" of where to live. Once that decision is made, the neighborhood has its own influence independent of parents. In neighborhoods characterized as unsafe, the most parents can do is limit their children's movement within the neighborhood in hopes of minimizing the effect of factors that may compromise their academic success. Parents' ability to secure spaces conducive to learning is not entirely driven by personal choice; social class is a major determinant of the extent to which parents can influence their children's life space.

Stage-setting deems the context of children's lived experiences to be just as important as the educational messages they receive from their parents. Consider a fictional middle-class parent named Tom and his child. Tom's home is located in a neighborhood inhabited by professionals and their families. Nearby is a well-funded high school, a thriving business section, coffee shops and restaurants, a major university, and several large parks where youth sporting events occur. On weekends, parents from the neighborhood attend their children's games and often arrange postgame trips to a local restaurant. Such activities provide opportunities for parents and children to interact about their children's current school experiences, academic progress, and college plans.

Tom's child is in a fortuitous position because the pro-academic messages he receives from his father are reinforced by his interactions with the community. Tom values education and has set the stage for his child to succeed. As a middle-class parent, Tom is likely to be quite involved in his child's schooling. His home may contain many books, he attends school functions, he knows his child's teachers, and he is well aware of the literature touting the benefits of involved parents. When we as researchers view Tom in the data set, he will be a parent who is high on involvement (home and school) with a child who is high-achieving.

Others in the data like Tom and his child will lead us toward the connection that highly involved parents tend to produce academically successful children. This conclusion would not recognize that Tom set the stage for his child to do well in school. Once the stage was set, his child was on course to being academically successful. Tom might proceed to be highly involved, but his involvement is not what is driving his child's school success. It is the fact that Tom has created a space that sets this child up for success. This stage-setting process is what is not adequately captured in quantitative data sets.

Effective stage-setting becomes easier to conceptualize when one considers the strong connection between the educational attainment of parents and their children. For example, most academicians have academically successful children, and certain aspects of their lifestyle reinforce the importance they attribute to education or living a "life of the mind": having a home office, regularly reading national media sources like the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, or *Washington Post*, hosting occasional dinner parties, effortlessly (and even obviously) engaging in (or enacting) critical thinking in common everyday discussions, and living among peers with levels of education above the national norm. This lifestyle would describe many academics regardless of whether they have children. In most cases, children growing up under these conditions cannot help but be academically successful; they certainly are not at risk of becoming high school dropouts. Whereas for most people a high school diploma is a major marker or transition point, college professors often consider K-16 compulsory. For academicians, high educational expectations are built into their lifestyle and the lifestyle they create for their child. They are able to (1) convey the importance of education to their children—indeed, the very concept of education is woven into the fabric of their identity—and (2) create a life space for their children that constantly reinforces the message. Thus, their children are likely to be academically successful regardless of how involved they are in their children's schooling.

This aspect of stage-setting is consistent

with the conclusion from the Coleman Report that nonschool factors are a major determinant of group differences in academic outcomes. We argue that parents' influence does not stem from their involvement in their children's schooling in the traditional sense, but rather from their location within a larger socioeconomic structure. However, the Coleman Report underestimates the extent to which schools contribute to group differences in academic outcomes. Schools are also a component of the life space that youth navigate. They are not fixed autonomous structures, but rather dynamic social systems, consisting of teachers and students, that have implications for youths' academic experiences. Parents can intervene in this space on behalf of their children. Also, a positive life space at home can create a buffer against negative experiences at school. But similar to neighborhoods, schools can affect academic achievement independent from the life space parents create in the home. As Prudence Carter notes elsewhere in this issue, school officials can perpetuate unequal educational experiences inside and outside of classrooms because their actions are informed by intensely embedded racial and class meanings that reinforce the strength and rigidity of social boundaries.

### **STAGE-SETTING VERSUS TRADITIONAL PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT**

The difference between stage-setting and the traditional conception of parental involvement examined in previous studies becomes apparent when we consider how each might be employed by parents. Whereas traditional forms of involvement comprise any number of parental activities, stage-setting requires that parents focus on only two factors: messages and life space. Certainly, parents can be traditionally involved in their children's schooling in some ways to accomplish each of these factors. However, stage-setting aims can also be achieved without employing any traditional forms of involvement. Thus, a busy parent with a demanding career can be a successful stage-setter with minimal direct involvement in his or her child's schooling.

Analysis of traditional forms of parental involvement does not capture the life space

within which children operate, which is independent of parents' actual activities. Students in our focus groups struggled when asked to name their parents' most important involvement activities that contributed to their academic success. They described their parents in ways such as: "They were supportive in life"; "They attended my band concerts"; "They left schooling up to me"; or "They did not talk much at all about school." At one point students were asked, "Did any of your parents read books to you when you were a child, attend PTA meetings, regularly converse with your teachers, or discuss college plans with you?" Many students shook their heads, and a male student recalled, "My parents didn't do any of those things with me. I have two older siblings that my parents gave attention to, so by the time I came along they were too tired to do anything academically with me."

These students' struggle in answering our questions highlights the challenge of trying to conceptualize how their parents assisted academically. It should be fairly easy to recall your parents being PTA members, reading books to you when you were young, having rules about homework, or having discussions with you about college or school courses. However, if your parents were in the background, so to speak, affecting your academic performance in abstract ways such as gradually changing your perspective on life, giving you the feeling that they supported your efforts in school and extracurricular activities, or instilling an academic motivation in you when you first began formal schooling, it is probably more difficult to quantify the behavioral contributions they made to your academic life. After reviewing the discussion with students in both focus groups, we had the impression that most of them had never thought about the specific activities their parents employed to enhance their school performance or whether these activities contributed to their academic success.

The themes that emerged from the focus groups describe the importance that parents placed on children's academic success in ways that differ from the conventional involvement activities that schools and policymakers currently advocate. Parents' primary contributions, according to students, stemmed from

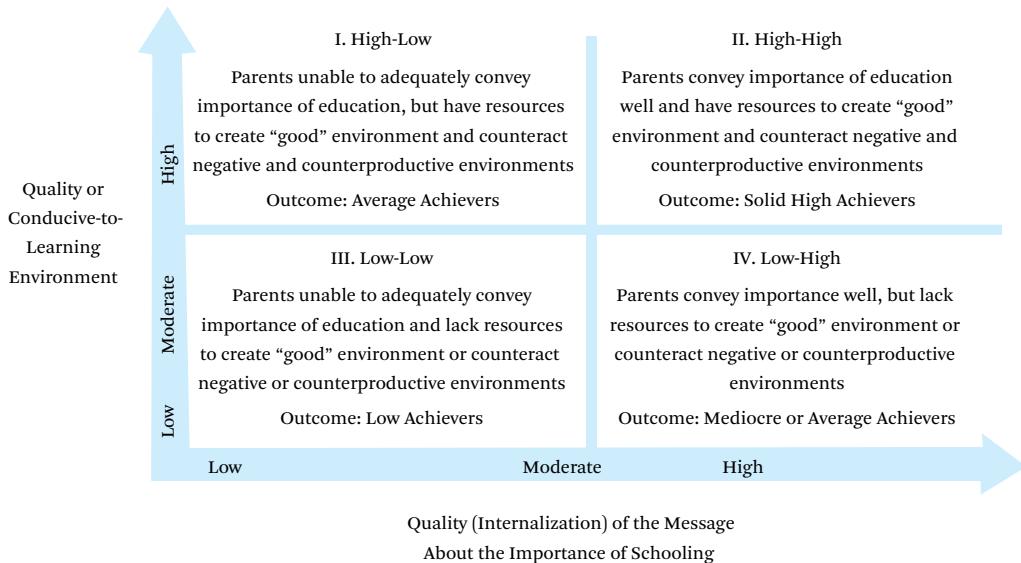
setting high academic expectations and creating a comfortable space in which they could develop their own academic motivations. These are core principles that advocates for parental involvement understand as important. In fact, they are the very same principles the educational community is attempting to capture in proscribing conventional involvement activities. Yet the ways in which the parents of the students we spoke with acted upon these principles were different from conventional involvement activities.

### STAGE-SETTING PROFILES

For further clarity, we provide a cross-tabulation for stage-setting in figure 1 that yields four distinct profiles. Children's *quality or conduciveness-to-learning environment* (QCLE) is listed along the *y*-axis, and the degree of successful *internalization of the message that schooling is important* is listed along the *x*-axis. Although cross-tabs convey that the factors along the *x*- and *y*-axes are dichotomized, they are useful in this case because they highlight four general profiles associated with stage-setting. However, both QCLE and the degree of internalization of messages about education for youth fall along a continuum, which label *low*, *moderate*, and *high*. It is more accurate to imagine the figure superimposed on a scatterplot of the relationship between measures that capture children's QCLE and the degree to which they identify with success in academic domains.

Each quadrant in figure 1 provides a general description of the children who fall under that profile. Children whose values on each factor place them in the top left quadrant typically live in environments that can be characterized as very conducive to (and reinforcing of) learning, but they have low levels of academic identification (thus the label "high-low"). Despite not feeling strongly defined by academics, these children will perform well enough in school to graduate from high school and even to attend college. This quadrant represents the typical children in a middle-class or affluent community whose academic performance places them in the middle or at the lower end of the achievement distribution in their schools. Although they are not among the high achievers, their achievement levels do not raise red

**Figure 1.** The Learning Environment and Parents' Message About the Value of Schooling:  
Stage-Setting



Source: Authors' calculations.

flags; their likelihood of dropping out of school is low.

Children in the top right quadrant (high-high) live in a similar environment (high on QCLE) but have internalized the positive messages about the value of schooling they receive in a manner that embeds academics within their self-definition. These children will be high achievers, and maybe even overachievers, who graduate from high school toward the top of their class and gain admission into selective colleges and universities.

The bottom left quadrant (low-low) represents children whose life space is not conducive to learning and who are not strongly identified with academics. These children would be low achievers *regardless* of their parents' level of involvement in their schooling. The message about the importance of schooling is not conveyed in a manner that anchors academics to these children's self-definition, and the environment they navigate compromises this process even further. This quadrant captures the typical low-achieving child living in a disadvantaged community.

Finally, children in the low-high group (bottom right quadrant) are those who strongly identify with academics but live in an environ-

ment that does not reinforce their academic identity. These children are typically the average to high achievers in disadvantaged communities.

Figure 1 provides some direction for how the concept of stage-setting can be tested. We argue that children's location within this framework strongly determines their achievement independent of their parents' level of *direct* involvement. This framework is also helpful for understanding why achievement varies between students who appear to be similar in many ways, such as in the schools they attend, the communities in which they live, and even the families from which they come. Although children in the top quadrants could be similar along numerous dimensions, their achievements will be determined by how strongly they identify with academics. Students with high QCLE levels are virtually assured of never being at any serious risk of dropping out of high school. Even when compared to children in the bottom left quadrant, children in the top left quadrant will perform better academically; being able to ride the wave of their high QCLE allows them to overcome their lack of academic identity. In fact, the identity they establish in the other domains made available to

them by their middle-class status (for example, lacrosse, gymnastics, soccer) might enable them to gain admission into good colleges despite their average levels of academic achievement. Similarly, the variations in levels of academic identification among children who are situated within low-QCLE contexts (the bottom quadrants) might account for the variation in achievement observed among children who appear to be similarly disadvantaged.

### STAGE-SETTING, SOCIAL CLASS, AND RACE

As noted earlier, we did not attach students' family SES to their parents' involvement activities when describing the themes that emerged from our focus groups. We would suggest, however, that the ease with which parents can set the stage for academic achievement is related to their socioeconomic resources, primarily because the resources commonly found in affluent communities are more reinforcing of parents' attempts to instill in their children the value of schooling. In fact, the spatial concentration of advantage within neighborhoods has an independent effect on youths' academic outcomes. James Ainsworth (2002) finds that as the percentage of adults with a college education and a professional or managerial occupation within a community increases, so do youths' educational aspirations and achievement. Furthermore, Ainsworth shows that the benefit of having high-status residents in a neighborhood overshadows the effects of negative neighborhood characteristics. He finds that more than half of the detrimental effect of living in economically deprived neighborhoods is attributable to a lack of high-status residents in such neighborhoods.

Conversely, living in areas with high concentrations of poverty can compromise the extent to which parents' messages about the value of schooling are ingrained in their children. Classic sociological studies note that disadvantaged communities lack the resources to sustain neighborhood institutions and public services and are characterized by persistent joblessness, which contributes to making these areas breeding places for the factors, such as crime, violence, and substance abuse, that can disconnect academic self-esteem from global

self-esteem (Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 1987, 1996). These conditions inhibit the development of educational skills, depress school achievement, and discourage teachers. William Julius Wilson (1987, 57) argues that "a vicious cycle is perpetuated through family, through the community, and through the schools"—all three being aspects of youths' life space.

Race can also have implications for parents' ability to effectively set the stage for their children's academic success. Parents from historically subordinate racial groups—such as black Americans—face challenges within their environments that are beyond their control and directly affect their children's life space. Elsewhere (Robinson and Harris 2014), we have found that levels of parental involvement in children's schooling *at home* are relatively similar across racial groups (whites, Asian Americans, Hispanics, and blacks), but that parental involvement *with schools* differs by race and some of these differences may result from schools reaching out to minority parents—particularly Hispanics—less than they do to white parents. Thus, black parents must raise children to identify with a domain in which evidence suggests they are rejected. For example, Eric Hanushek, John Kain, and Steven Rivkin (2004) provide strong evidence that a higher rate of minority enrollment increases the probability that white teachers will exit a school, even more than a lower rate of wages. They find that a 10 percent increase in black enrollment would require about a 10 percent increase in salaries to neutralize the elevated probability that white teachers will leave a school. Furthermore, they find that the racial composition of schools is an important determinant of the probability that white teachers—particularly newer teachers—will leave public schools entirely or switch school districts. Catherine Freeman, Benjamin Scafidi, and David Sjoquist (2005) also find that white teachers are much more likely to leave schools that serve higher proportions of black students in favor of schools that serve lower proportions of black and low-income students and have students who score higher on achievement exams.

The reality that black parents must cultivate an academic identity in their children in con-

texts where some educators are attempting to avoid doing so is particularly disconcerting given that this avoidance appears to adversely affect the quality of the instruction these children receive. In a study of the implications of school racial composition for teacher quality, Kirabo Jackson (2009) finds that in schools in which the share of black student enrollment increased following the repeal of a busing program to maintain racial balance across schools within a school district, there was a decrease in the proportion of experienced teachers, teachers with high licensure exam scores, and teachers who had demonstrated an ability to improve student test scores. Jackson's study design supports the conclusion that the absence of high-quality teachers in schools with high proportions of black students is caused by the racial composition of the schools rather than by neighborhood characteristics. Further, the change in school quality immediately following the repeal of the busing program indicated that teachers exited in anticipation of the arrival of more black students. Given the negative implications of attending a predominantly black school—which is the case for many black youth in the United States—black parents have a particularly unique challenge in effectively setting the stage for their children's academic success.

The findings from Sean Reardon's study reported in this issue identify a potential explanation for why segregated schools present challenges that minority parents must overcome: higher school poverty rates. Reardon finds very clear evidence that disparity in average school poverty rates between whites and blacks is consistently the single most powerful correlate of racial disparities in achievement. This implies that high-poverty schools—which blacks are more likely to attend than whites—are less effective than lower-poverty schools. The strategy of reducing children's exposure to poor classmates, which may lead to meaningful reductions in racial disparities in academic achievement, is less viable for black and Hispanic parents.

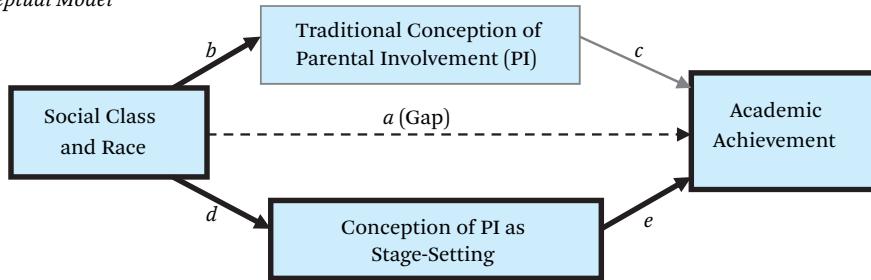
Racial differences also exist in parents' ability to influence the school environment, even in affluent schools. In a study conducted in a well-funded school in an affluent community,

Amanda Lewis and John Diamond (2015) find that white parents display a sense of entitlement to challenge their children's track placement. They push their children into honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses—where instruction is superior, the curriculum is more challenging, and teachers are more experienced—against the advice of teachers and regardless of whether the courses are above their children's academic ability. White parents are able to do this with little to no resistance from school personnel. In fact, the process is smooth and requires minimal interaction with school officials. Furthermore, Lewis and Diamond show that school personnel often respond to the pressure to placate white middle-class parents by making decisions that go against their instincts and provide benefits to some students (mostly white and middle-class) but not others (mostly black and Hispanic).

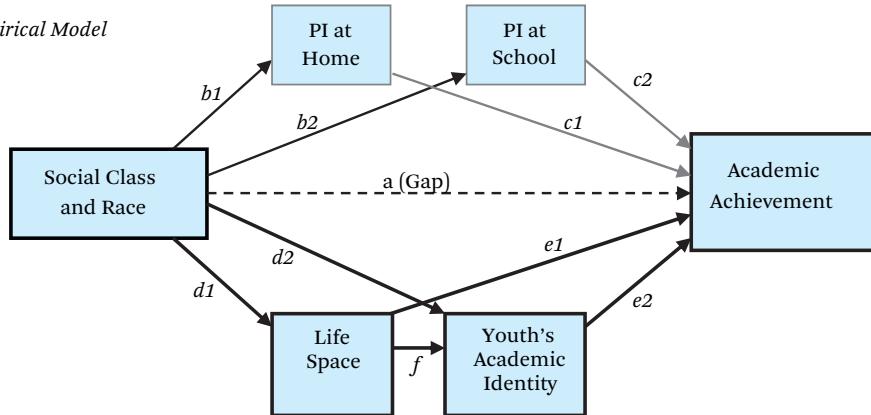
Although stage-setting may be easier for families with more socioeconomic resources compared to families with fewer socioeconomic resources, stage-setting should not be conflated with social class. In theory, socioeconomically disadvantaged parents can effectively set the stage for their child to experience academic success, and in fact there are socioeconomically disadvantaged high achievers. However, their exceptionality suggests that disadvantaged parents are less likely to be successful stage-setters because they face greater challenges in doing so than more affluent parents. Thus, stage-setting is not a proxy for social class but a mechanism that explains the link between social class and achievement. For example, scholars have been able to observe a strong negative association between poverty and achievement because poverty can be disruptive to children's everyday lives (Duncan and Rodgers 1988). Karen Seccombe (2000) highlights several studies that show that over the course of a year a majority of the poorest families experience at least one of the following deprivations: eviction, crowded housing, disconnection of utilities, no stove, no refrigerator, or housing with upkeep problems. All these aspects of the life space impact stage-setting; they are the mechanisms that explain why lower socioeconomic circumstances are related to poor achievement.

**Figure 2.** Conceptual and Empirical Model for Parental Involvement as a Mechanism for Explaining the Social Class and Race–Achievement Link

*Conceptual Model*



*Empirical Model*



Source: Authors' calculations.

We posit that stage-setting explains a greater share of the link between social class and achievement than traditional forms of parental involvement. We illustrate this link in figure 2, which shows the conceptual and empirical models we are describing. The models depict the role of parental involvement in children's achievement relative to social class and race. The conceptual model suggests that class and race differences exist in traditional forms of parental involvement (path *b*). However, we portray path *c* in gray to convey that the connection between traditional forms of parental involvement and achievement is tenuous. Instead, it is *stage-setting* that accounts for class and race differences in academic achievement; groups vary in their ability to successfully set the stage (path *d*), and stage-setting strongly determines academic achievement (path *e*).

The empirical model provides some clarity on the overall process of our perspective. Because the traditional conception of parental involvement contains two components, home and school, we decompose path *b* into paths *b1* and *b2*. Similarly, the "effects" for parental involvement are decomposed into paths *c1* (home) and *c2* (school). The empirical model depicts the variation along class and racial lines in the forms of parental involvement at home and at school and shows that these forms of involvement are only modestly related to children's achievement (represented by the gray paths). Instead, the factors associated with stage-setting, illustrated in the bottom portion of the empirical model, are the driving forces behind the impact of parents on their children's academic lives. Specifically, class and race are major factors in determining the

quality or conduciveness to learning of children's life space (path *d*1) and the extent to which children identify with academics (path *d*2), and each of these factors affects academic achievement (paths *e*1 and *e*2) independent of traditional forms of parental involvement. Path *f* denotes that the quality of children's life space influences—either by reinforcing or by compromising—youths' academic identity.

Affluent parents tend to be more involved in their children's academic lives and to have high-achieving children. Many educators view the success of these children as resulting in large part from their parents' involvement. We suspect that affluent parents are being credited with superior parental involvement when in fact it is stage-setting that is driving the academic success of their children. These children are likely to attend well-funded schools with excellent teachers, characteristics of a conducive-to-learning life space more than of parental involvement. We recognize that a positive life space alone does not guarantee academic success and that school finance reform has greatly reduced funding disparities between high-performing suburban districts and low-performing urban districts (Odden and Picus 2007). What contributes to the effectiveness of these positive factors within the life space, however, is that messages about the importance of schooling have a more lasting effect on the children of affluent parents because there are fewer threats in their lives that could disconnect their academic self-esteem from their global self-esteem. To be clear, we acknowledge that affluent parents are more involved than their less advantaged counterparts. It is also true, however, that many educators find the anecdotally observed relationship between parental involvement and high achievement too appealing to ignore and thus promote parental involvement as the answer to most of the problems within K-12. We propose instead that affluent parents have created a space that sets their children up for success largely independent from their involvement.

### CONCLUSION

In sum, effective stage-setting is more rooted in lifestyle than in parental involvement activi-

ties. Once the stage is set for academic success, children are on course toward being academically successful. A child with an academic profile that places her on course to attend Princeton University will not suddenly "tank" if her parents reduce their level of involvement. Although she might not remain on the Princeton trajectory after a reduction of parental involvement, she is unlikely to drop out of high school and will probably gain admission into a fine college or university. Our point is that for any child to remain on a positive trajectory—toward Princeton or elsewhere—the parents might simply need to maintain a positive space conducive to academic success, and that this space may or may not include traditional forms of parental involvement. A key advantage of stage-setting over traditional conceptions of parental involvement is that it is not a one-size-fits-all strategy. Whereas traditional conceptions advocate for parents' involvement in all the same activities, stage-setting is contextual and can involve different types of support for different children.

The Coleman Report posited that the home itself and the cultural influences immediately surrounding the home drive inequality of educational opportunity (Coleman et al. 1966). Our own previous work, however, suggests that black and Hispanic parents value education either the same as or more than their white counterparts (Harris 2011; Robinson and Harris 2014), and that achievement inequality in outcomes by race and class persist even net of forms of parental involvement within parents' control (Robinson and Harris 2014). Additionally, the configuration and resources of cities, neighborhoods, and schools play a significant role in educational inequality (Alexander, Entwistle, and Olson 2014). In fact, analysis of national data shows that inequality in academic outcomes is smallest upon school entry and widens (rather than remaining constant) as children matriculate through the early grades (Fryer and Levitt 2006). Schools also operate and respond differently for parents based on race and class, with white parents being advantaged at the expense of black and Hispanic parents and children (Lareau 2003; Lewis and Diamond 2015). Thus, not all parents have the same ability to influence their children's aca-

demic outcomes or opportunities. In our view, suggesting that inequality of educational opportunity stems primarily from the home itself and the culture does not square well with recent empirical evidence. The conception of school and family as being in competition ignores the reality that these factors both jointly and independently influence how the stage is set in the first place.

The stage-setting framework suggests that the concept of parental involvement needs to be conceptualized differently in policy and in practice. Several states and districts have recently called for increases in parental involvement both in and out of school. However, given the differences that parents experience in setting the stage, educators and school personnel should take more active roles in providing parents with effective strategies to help their children academically. Furthermore, educators should work to assist parents with setting the stage by addressing the inequality in how students experience the school setting. More specifically, addressing the issues discussed by Prudence Carter in this issue, by Lewis and Diamond (2015), and by Tyson (2011) would minimize the extent to which school personnel perpetuate racial inequality by responding to youth based on racialized and class-based assumptions and tracking racial minorities into lower academic tracks.

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