

# Annette Lareau's home advantage: social class and parental intervention in elemen...

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



The book that I selected for my book review was *Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education* by Annette Lareau. Though the data from this book was originally collected in the 1980's, the points that Lareau makes about differences in socioeconomic status are still relevant in today's schools. The book contains research that Lareau conducted on parental involvement and interventions in two different first grade classrooms - one at a school called Colton, and the other at a school called Prescott. The two schools differed in their socioeconomic makeup, with Colton schools described as serving students from working class families, and Prescott schools serving students from middle class families.

Lareau states that the purpose of her book revolves around one major discrepancy between the two schools: " The issue here is not the absolute level of parent involvement, but rather the gap between the relatively high level involvement of middle class and upper class parents and the relatively low level of involvement of working class and lower class parents" (Lareau, p. 6) She found that while the number and type of requests made by teachers for parent involvement were similar, Colton parents were much less involved in their child's school than were Prescott parents. Lareau's research is directed towards finding out why this difference exists.

The main reason that the parental involvement levels differ at schools comprised of students in lower class families compared to middle class families is that middle class families feel much more comfortable and able to use their social status and resources to their child's educational advantage. Lareau states that " while relationships between Prescott and students'

families are characterized by interconnectedness, relationships between Colton and students' families are characterized by separation" (p. 8) At Colton, most parents had an educational level up to completing high school. Lareau found that families viewed the teacher as a professional and that families believed that academic learning mainly takes place at the school. Because of the teachers' education level in comparison to the parents, parents give the teacher professional status and assume that the teacher knows what ways are best for the child to learn. Additionally, they feel uncomfortable entering the classroom or challenging the decisions of teacher (much in the way that one might be uncomfortable challenging a doctor or other professional). Lareau goes even further than this, saying that in the same way working class parents can typically leave their job behind when they come home from work, so too do they expect their child to essentially 'leave school at school' (other than completing their homework). That is, unless there are extreme conflicts, home life and school life typically do not mix. Colton families relied on grades on assignments and on report cards to indicate to them how their children were doing in school.

In Prescott families, however, home life and school life were intertwined with one another. Parents from Prescott considered teachers to be their intellectual equals (or even intellectually inferior) and considering teaching to be something that they could do, yet simply chose not to do. Additionally, many parents had family members, friends, or neighbors who were teachers in the community. Because of this, parents had no issues entering classrooms whenever they wanted, and some even came right up to the

teacher during a lesson to begin a conversation. Parents had no issues challenging the teacher, requesting meetings with the teacher, requesting special programs or services, or going to the administration to voice their concerns against the teacher or to request a specific teacher. If a parent felt that their child was not being taught properly by the teacher, they would search outside the school for tutoring or request extra work to do with the student at home. Mothers more frequently volunteered in the classrooms at Prescott because they could get information about what was going on in their child's classroom and how their child was performing in comparison to other students. This strategy was typically not utilized by Colton parents. In addition, mothers at Prescott were more likely to converse with other mothers, and thus had 'insider information.' Because Colton mothers did not engage in this type of interaction with other mothers, they knew little about the nuances of the day to day workings of their child's classroom.

However, there is a negative side to parental involvement that is also touched upon in the book. Though Prescott parents were more involved at the school, Prescott children were also more anxious and felt more pressure than Colton children did due to this involvement. This pressure also extended into family life based on the interconnectedness of Prescott families with the school. On the other hand, because the Colton families separated themselves from the school, they essentially protected their children from this kind of stress. As a teacher, this is important information to remember, as this stress can inhibit the child's performance in the classroom.

Lareau also discusses the importance of gender roles in parental involvement, with the Prescott mothers being most involved at the school, and the Colton fathers being least involved at school. Lareau makes the point that while Prescott mothers most fit the 'ideal image' of parental involvement at school, there was little evidence to support that teachers were considering the home environment of the children. Often, teachers perceived (usually inaccurately) the home lives of children at Colton through a negative lens, which led to lower expectations (p. 87). Thus, though teachers may assume that Colton parents and Prescott parents place different values on education, this is not true at all. Colton and Prescott parents simply differ in their approaches to their child's education. This point is very important in family-school partnerships, as it is important to not assume things or pre-judge a family simply because they do not meet the stereotypical ideal of being 'involved in their child's schooling.'

In summary, the reasons for the difference in parental involvement at the two schools were not because of differences in the valuing of education, nor were they because of differing numbers of requests made by teachers for parents to be involved. Lareau states that the reasons for the differences in parental involvement at the two schools stem from the innate and unequalled privileges awarded to those individuals from a higher social class, and their ability to invest more resources in their children's education. Because middle class parents typically have more years of education themselves, they have the capacity and competence to help their children in school. In contrast, lower class families may lack (or even simply think they lack) confidence,

and thus be unable or hesitant to help their children with their schoolwork (p. 170). In addition, middle class parents have more material resources to help their children, they view teachers as equals or lower status, and their style of work typically gives them more flexibility and more availability to be able to physically be at the school building more often (p. 171). In contrast, lower class families defer to the teacher's professional opinion on educating their children, and they typically have less flexibility in their working schedule to be able to physically be at the school. These differences are the main reasons for the level of involvement at Prescott being higher than at Colton.

As a teacher, this research is important to know because we will be interacting with families from various socioeconomic backgrounds. This study proves that there are true differences between the ways in which families from lower socioeconomic classes are involved and the ways in which families from higher socioeconomic classes are involved. However, the important thing to remember from this study is that overall, regardless of socioeconomic status, parents value their child's education and they want them to succeed! This may seem like a common sense statement, but I think often teachers regard lack of parent involvement at school as a general lack of involvement with the child overall, and this is definitely not the case!

Based on the results of this study, I think one of the most important things we can do is to truly make parents welcome in our classroom. I never want a parent to be afraid or intimidated to talk to me about their child, and I will work very hard to establish relationships with each one of my students' families to prevent this. I want to emphasize to my students' families that we

are partners in their child's education, and that I have a lot to learn from them, as they know their child better than I ever will! Also, as the book mentioned, one of the most important things to focus on is letting the families know directly how their student is doing in school. This is a simple activity that I can do to make sure that I am keeping lines of communications open with families, and that everyone is on the same page. Lareau's findings definitely shaped my ideas about how families differ based on social privileges, and how to use this information to connect with families and ensure that children are getting all the support they need to succeed in school.