**Book Review**

**WALDEN UNIVERSITY**

# Review of *Just Schools: Building Equitable Collaborations With Families and Communities* by Ann Ishimaru

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## Abstract

K–12 schools are facing a syndemic of critical junctures right now: On the one hand, school communities and families are still reeling from the effects of racial reckonings and the COVID-19 pandemic, while on the other hand, school leaders and decision-makers are grappling with how to effectively engage families and students amid demands and realizations for equity and justice. The book *Just Schools: Building Equitable Collaborations with Families and Communities* (2020) by Ann Ishimaru provides tools and pathways forward. Ishimaru first describes how our education systems have long been incubators of oppression and disengagement, steeped in colonizing methods and deficit views of "nondominant" families and traditions. Through narratives—grounded in her experiences and those of other families—she highlights examples of how schools and systems have narrowed or blocked opportunities for "equitable collaborations." In response, Ishimaru offers frameworks grounded in critical race theory, decolonizing methods, cultural–historical activity theory, and cross-sector collaborations to foster more just and equitable partnerships between schools and families. To operationalize these frameworks and shape reader understanding, she then offers several case studies that exhibit participatory, co-designed spaces and processes that center the family and school community. *Just Schools: Building Equitable Collaborations With Families and Communities* is a critical read for educational leaders and school community stakeholders seeking to redesign school, family, and community partnerships; improve school governance structures and methods; and rewrite the dominant narrative of educational systems that often exclude parents and families via traditional methods of engagement.

# Review

Ishimaru, A. (2020). *Just schools: Building equitable collaborations with families and communities*. Teachers College Press. ISBN: 9780807763193, 199 pp. $34.99, paperback.

For decades, many critical education researchers have called for emancipation from institutionalized control in K–12 schooling and have advocated for the empowerment of students, families, and communities to reform the educational systems steeped in injustice, oppression, and colonization (Anderson, 1998; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In response, Ann Ishimaru's *Just Schools: Building Equitable Collaborations With Families and Communities* (2020) explores the promising intersectionality of education systems and schooling, families, and the greater school community through what she calls "equitable collaborations" (p. 4). Using multi-layered critical, community, and social theoretical approaches, alongside the lived experiences of students and families and her own family, Ishimaru highlights case studies and community narratives attempting to rewrite the hidden curriculum of educational engagement through which parents and families are often systematically and organizationally subjected.

*Just Schools: Building Equitable Collaborations With Families and Communities* is part of the Teachers College Press Multicultural Education Series edited by James A. Banks. The intended readership of this book is anyone connected to a K–12 school community seeking to redesign partnerships, improve school governance structures and methods, and rewrite the dominant narrative of educational systems that often exclude parents and families via traditional methods of engagement. This would include educational policymakers, school and district leaders, K–12 educators, community organizations, and parent and family groups.

In the Introduction, Ishimaru begins by describing her positionality and lived experiences as a cisgender, heterosexual, Asian American, Harvard-educated mother, and K–12 educator. She shares how her experiences as a mother attending parent nights, combined with her middle and high school teacher and educational researcher background, have provided situations she has been personally privy to that have revealed shallow attempts of school personnel and policymakers "hungrily casting about for knowledge, resources, and ideas about how they might become more culturally responsive and more equitable" (p. 6). Ishimaru asserts that her experiences have provided her with the opportunities to recognize and research how families and community members have historically been positioned as a "largely untapped source of expertise and leadership for achieving educational equity and justice" (2020, p. 4) and in turn disenfranchised both from and within the school environment. The crux of the book is that school and policy leaders should seek opportunities for more profound, transformational change, which Ishimaru terms "equitable collaborations" (2020, p. 4). Ishimaru aims to provide readers with tools and insights to navigate and produce systematic changes via "a justice-based educational change agenda … co-constructed by both professional educators and those with the greatest expertise on their own children" (2020, p. 13).

## Nondominant Families and Schools

Within the first chapter, Ishimaru lays a brief yet succinct groundwork for understanding how institutionalized racism has shaped current educational policies and rules of familial engagement. She details how prejudices and biases have impacted institutionalized educational systems, in effect producing (and continuing to do so) deficit conceptions of "nondominant" parents and families (Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2016). Ishimaru presents a stark juxtaposition of how families play a critical role in a child's educational success, yet biased and prejudiced policies have destructively shaped the participatory access of nondominant families both with and within school systems. She emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the existing structures and deficient narratives to "understand where, why, and how we often unwittingly reinforce the underlying dynamics of inequity when we envision and undertake solutions" (Ishimaru, 2020, p. 15).

Ishimaru further highlights the traditional and often tokenistic methods schools use to sideline families and community members during policy dialogues and decision-making meetings. These include instances of families and community members routinely relegated to serving a role in "plug-in" extracurricular activities, such as PTAs, field trips, fundraiser-like bake sales, curriculum nights, and sporting and performance events—in effect, opportunities to participate without enacting authentic change (p. 19). Ishimaru extends these examples by citing several historical instances of the unequal power dynamics and trauma schools have historically reinforced. In short, the traditional and existing models of familial involvement in K–12 schools have provided little-to-no lasting impact on institutional change. Instead, these models have only further exacerbated the separatist relational agenda between schooling and families.

## A Framework for Equitable Collaborations

In Chapter 2, "New Rules of Engagement: From Conventional Partnerships to Equitable Collaborations," Ishimaru presents new rules of engagement to begin the work of reorganizing partnerships between schools, families, and communities while offering culturally rich resources "as a starting point for constructing alternative possibilities" (p. 38). Ishimaru draws from various theories to triangulate a multidisciplinary approach and presents an equitable collaboration conceptual framework. These include critical race theory (CRT; Bell, 1995; Brayboy, 2006), decolonization (Patel, 2015; Smith, 2021), cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT; Engeström, 2001; Nussbaumer, 2012), cross-sector collaborations (Pekel et al., 2015), and sociocultural theories. Ishimaru aligns the purpose of the book with the action principles behind CRT, decolonizing, and CHAT theories that reveal the importance and transformational power of deep histories replete with diverse voices, experiences, resiliency, cultural practices, and knowledge.

Through community-based organizational theories, Ishimaru outlines relational and collective power paradigms for schools to embed within their systems to better sustain school community-led leadership and lasting, impactful change. Ishimaru broadly addresses the importance of applying sociocultural learning theories since "learning does not happen in a vacuum" and urges that we must "think of an educational system as multiple overlapping 'activity systems'" (p. 41).

In Chapter 3, "Nondominant Families on Their Own Terms: Lived Theories of Educational Injustice," Ishimaru does not spend a great length of time delineating which—and to what extent—sociocultural learning theories to operationalize, and instead outlines the impacts and implications of these theoretical constructs at the systemic, school-level, and individual levels through animated vignettes of families and community members. While Ishimaru shares episodic examples of how systemic inequities trickle down to the individual and begin to take an institutionalized shape—affecting the power dynamics, policies, resource allocations, and daily interactions of a school community—the examples in the following chapters provide pathways forward to redress these longstanding hegemonies.

## Case Studies

Chapter 4, "Systematic Collaborations: Multiorganizational Educational Equity Initiatives," serves as a pivot point, wherein Ishimaru examines how a cross-sector collaboration of school personnel and policymakers with families and community organizations serving as cultural brokers can address educational inequities through reciprocal learning and collective creation. To highlight how parent and family deficiency logic can be addressed at a systemic level, Ishimaru presents several case studies that embrace the principles and methods of equitable collaborations. Of the case studies discussed: Fairview District, Westfield Center, and the Kellogg School District utilize cultural brokering strategies to increase parent and family engagement; Community Place uses a data carousel and small focus groups with members of the school community; Riverview District employs a co-developed survey and conducts one-on-one interviews with school community stakeholders; and Southeast Seattle Education Coalition (SESEC) engages the school community through a survey and a summit meeting. Discussion of these approaches and their outcomes includes how preconceived, status quo notions of

parental engagement must be reimagined so that critical decisions are made *with* students and families, and not *for* them. Additionally, Ishimaru highlights how the inclusion of community-based partners and organizations can build institutional trust and further "cultivate[s] collaboration with families" (p. 93) and how inclusive processes of engagement and decision-making must include a sharing of power and responsibility.

## Students, Families, and Data

Chapter 5, "Collaborating in Organizational Improvement: Data Inquiry with Families, Communities, and Educators," demonstrates another vital point Ishimaru makes: the need for participatory, transparent data made available to—and by—all school community stakeholders to foster informed, responsible decision-making (Holcomb, 2004). Instead of data being simply "about students and families" (2020, p. 100) or framing "students and families as sources of data" (2020, p. 102), Ishimaru proposes a shift to "family leadership in data-informed transformation" (2020, p. 105). She draws on concrete examples of schools and learning organizations utilizing community-based research practices and data collection methods to inform "collective inquiry" and enact "transformative organizational change" (2020, p. 99). This chapter culminates with the introduction of a model of data inquiry for equitable collaboration. Comprised of six distinct phases (question, prioritize, engage, make sense, strategize, and act), this model champions a "solidarity-driven" approach to developing family-driven shared leadership practices (p. 119).

## Co-Designing Practices

Throughout the book, Ishimaru provides several frameworks with accompanying figures that support readers in reflecting on how everyday moments and interactions within the K–12 system "are also microcosms of their broader systems" (p. 120).

In Chapter 6, "Rewriting Moment-to-Moment Interactions: Families as Co-Designers," Ishimaru revisits several of the various theories previously drawn upon to build out a "solidarity-driven co-design" process rooted in a participatory design research (PDR) framework (p. 129). Ishimaru suggests that this process positions youth, families, and the school community as co-designers of both learning and data-driven evaluation processes. This approach focuses on inclusion and allows for "critical historicity" (p. 129) to address historical disenfranchisements and foster authentic relationships and community accountability. Further, it allows for movement beyond merely "documenting deficit-based processes" and rewrites the "rules of engagement" (p. 129). Specifically, the process outlines the following principles to guide co-designing practices that are justice-oriented and equitable: (1) start with family and community priorities, interests, concerns, knowledge, and resources; (2) transform power and undertake change as collective inquiry; and (3) build reciprocity and transformative agency (Engeström, 2001; Mitra, 2006).

In Chapter 7, "Co-Designing Justice and Well-Being With/in Systems and Conclusions," Ishimaru presents three cases of school leaders that use co-designing practices alongside tenets of the equitable collaboration framework to address differences among educational experiences with an overt focus on justice and school community well-being. While each of these school leaders discusses how they have set out to tackle a specific, pre-determined issue, their journey in using co-designing practices highlights other challenges and methods to traversing complex educational systems and spaces. For one, co-designing is not meant to serve as a binary process of either process or product, nor are co-designing activities supposed to be performative in nature and "do little to shift power, roles, or assumptions" (p. 148). Instead, co-designing is both a process and a product achieved through a cyclical, relational process.

Another challenge these school leaders express was navigating power dynamics, while still recognizing the multiple identities they represent. They share their struggles in unpacking their positionalities, roles, and

responsibilities, with one describing this paradigm as messy and another conceding that "If your positionality impedes trust, then you have to be willing to neutralize that factor" (p. 150).

## Discussion

In *Just Schools: Building Equitable Collaborations with Families and Communities*, Ishimaru presents an accessible understanding of how race and power have shaped (and not shaped) agency and change in educational systems and provides new possibilities and strategies for co-designing justice-based, equitable collaboration initiatives among families, communities, and schools. The book's structure weaves narrative storytelling alongside research-supported historical analyses and current issues schools and families grapple with to foster collaborations based on equity, social justice, and transformational learning. The choice of Ishimaru's dialogical discourse approach grounds the empirical research and policy systems in personalized efforts of co-designed school and family partnerships. Additional resources in the book's appendices and notes section also provide readers with support in moving away from a school-centric paradigm into a "community-centric universe" (p. 33). Also, for added helpful context, Ishimaru provides definitions of words and explains language choices to help shape reader understanding of how multi-layered words with stigmatizing relationships of power (like race and community) are framed within the intersections of schooling, families, communities, and educational equity.

However, one critique of the book is the omission of students in many of the discussions and the design of frameworks for decision-making processes. Existing literature points to the benefits of including students in school governance and decision-making processes, specifically in non-tokenistic ways. Findings have shown that student-led initiatives and youth-adult partnerships increase academic achievement and social engagement while decreasing antisocial and harmful behaviors (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Fuentes-Moreno et al., 2020; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Including students, as partners and leaders alongside other school community stakeholders, in co-designing the policies and practices that affect them is imperative.

## Conclusion

Overall, *Just Schools: Building Equitable Collaborations With Families and Communities* catalyzes the discussion and findings of numerous research studies that have demonstrated positive results for student learners and strengthened parental and family engagement when all community stakeholders are involved in the educational processes—both in and out of school. Ishimaru offers valuable insight for schools and school community actors in conducting research and co-designing collaborative spaces and processes with families and community members. Her intentions to "depart from objective academic authority" to appeal to a "broader audience" and reveal a "broader story" align with the same actions she asserts schools must take in their efforts to forge equitable partnerships (Ishimaru, personal communication, April 20, 2020). Given the current events of political polarization concerning public education and public schools being propagated as scapegoats for misaligned intentions, the book provides tangible methods for working across diverse school community groups through fostering shared values and equitable goals for students and the school community broadly.

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