Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools

By Amanda E. Lewis and John B. Diamond
Oxford University Press. 2015. 272 pp. $27.95 hardcover.

Reviewer: Angel L. Harris, Duke University

Despite the Best Intentions is well written and accessible to laypersons. It can be taught at both the graduate and undergraduate level across social science classes that focus on historical or contemporary issues within American education. The book is an ethnographic study (although it does contain some quantitative analysis) of a high school—Riverview—located in an affluent community. The findings can be applied to the typical well-funded school in an affluent school district.

Lewis and Diamond succeed in reframing an important topic; after reading this book, I will never again use the phrase “racial achievement gap.” It implies that racial differences in achievement result from racial differences in the grades/scores children earn. However, Lewis and Diamond convincingly discuss and show how aspects of schools normally operate in a manner that systematically results in racial groups being exposed to a different quality of instruction and overall educational experiences, which results in racial differences in the grades/scores children receive. Thus, rather than saying we study the racial achievement gap, it is more accurate to say we study racial inequality in education.

The empirical portion of the book begins with an assessment of whether racial inequality in education exists because blacks and Latin@s are oppositional toward schooling. Although this is a popular narrative among many white parents and has become conventional wisdom in general discourse, Lewis and Diamond’s findings replicate findings from numerous other qualitative (Carter 2005; Tyson 2011) and quantitative (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1998; Harris 2011) studies that fail to find support for the notion that racial minorities are oppositional toward schooling. In fact, in addition to finding no racial differences in negative peer sanctioning for high achievement, they find that black students receive more support from their peers to perform well in school than whites.

If blacks and Latin@s do not resist schooling, then what drives racial inequality in education? Lewis and Diamond highlight school factors. Specifically, they note that although the ostensive aspects of school organizational routines (formal
rules, procedures, and documented modes of operating and how things should be done) convey fairness and race neutrality, the performance or enactment of those routines on a daily basis deviate from this ideal. The norms that govern how things are actually done on a day-to-day basis lead to application of procedures and enforcement of rules that favor some students (mostly white and middle class) over others (mostly blacks and Latin@s). Rules and regulations are not enforced uniformly, which results in blacks and Latin@s being disciplined more due to heightened scrutiny (and whites’ behavioral infractions going unnoticed or excused) and more whites being enrolled in higher academic tracks independent of academic ability.

A manner in which actual organizational practice deviates from ideal organizational routines is in students’ track assignment. Parents have the final decision in their children’s track assignment, and 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. This occurs with little to no resistance from school personnel. In fact, the process is smooth and requires minimal interaction with school officials. Thus, despite the fact that the typical achievement distribution is normally distributed, at schools like Riverview there is a “U-shaped” distribution in track placement, with most students in either the low- or high-end courses and relatively few in the academic middle.

In addition to the superior overall educational experience many white students receive in the higher-level academic tracks, another factor that contributes to racial inequality in schooling are weighted grade point averages (GPAs); students in the higher-level tracks receive an additional half point on their GPA in each class they take. Thus, for these students a B is worth 3.5 rather than a 3.0. If students take an AP class and AP exam, their grades are weighted upward one full point; an A is worth 5 GPA points rather than 4. Given that a greater share of whites are enrolled in the higher-level classes (recall that many are over-placed), they receive greater GPA returns for each actual course grade than the larger share of blacks and Latin@s, whose GPAs reflect the actual grades they receive. This grade inflation for whites leads them to have much higher GPAs than their minority counterparts. An interesting strategy many white, middle-class parents employ that produces similar outcomes on tests is to have their children undergo special education testing to receive a learning disability label, which earns them more time on standardized tests.

The contradiction between race-neutral policies and the practice of these policies results in white advantages (and black and Latin@ disadvantages) in being disciplined and track assignment, which exacerbate racial differences in (1) exposure to quality of instruction and overall academic experience, (2) receipt of boosted GPAs, (3) the perception of being a good student, and (4) when cultural deficiency is invoked to explain lack of academic success. Furthermore, the pressure on school personnel to placate white, middle-class parents often results in them making decisions that go against their instincts and provides benefits to some students (mostly white and middle class) over others (mostly blacks and Latin@s).
Lewis and Diamond show that white students benefit from (1) occupying a default status within the United States that enables them to determine the “good” norms to which other groups are compared, (2) the enactment of school organizational norms that favor them at the expense of others, and (3) parental intervention in (or circumvention of) school organizational routines. These things occur despite the best intentions of school personnel, who often unknowingly perpetuate racial inequality in schooling. One question does remain unanswered, however; how do we convince all parents to promote an educational system that is truly equitable for all children regardless of race? This is the challenge for all educators and scholars who study education.

Reference


