



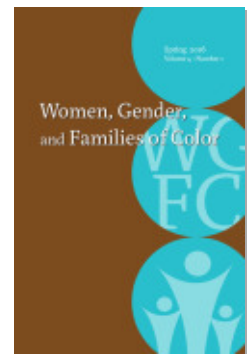
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*Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives
in Good Schools* by Amanda E. Lewis, John B. Diamond (review)

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Book Review

Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools, by Amanda E. Lewis and John B. Diamond, Oxford University Press, \$27.95, ISBN: 978-0-19-534272-7

Reviewed by John L. Rury, *University of Kansas*

This case study of black and white students at an affluent suburban high school examines a range of critical issues in race and education, revealing insights that can be further explored in subsequent studies. While hardly the final word on these questions, it also highlights issues that can be useful for practicing educators.

Despite the attention devoted to high-poverty schools, only about one in five African American secondary students attend such institutions. The rest are in schools with varying degrees of integration and affluence, with one in eight attending low-poverty high schools. Lewis and Diamond's study is set in one of the latter institutions, in an unspecified metropolitan area. Given the pseudonym Riverview, the school is evenly divided between black and white students, with many fewer Hispanics and Asians. While the local community is solidly middle class, white income and wealth are generally greater than that of African Americans.

The book focuses on racial disproportionality in disciplinary measures and in track placements in general, rather than honors or advanced-placement courses. Attention is also devoted to oppositional culture among African American students, although Lewis and Diamond find little evidence of it at Riverview.

At the center of this analysis is the influence of white parents in daily decision making at Riverview High. Through interviews with students, school

personnel, and both black and white parents, Lewis and Diamond plumb the depths of power and privilege in the institution. They reveal that school personnel routinely defer to the expressed or perceived wishes of influential parents. Such dynamics were especially evident regarding discipline, as students and school employees reported inequitable enforcement of school rules. This apparently accounted for much disproportionality in suspensions and other disciplinary actions, although few numbers are offered.

A somewhat similar process appeared to operate in tracking decisions, with white parents more aggressively pursuing honors or advanced placement assignments. There is telling testimony from black parents who fought to get their children into these classes, meeting resistance from educators. The result was a commonplace observation of “two high schools” within the same institution, a situation lamented by many but rarely discussed openly.

In the book’s most conceptually interesting chapter, Lewis and Diamond document white explanations of these racial disparities. They find familiar cultural and behavioral accounts of perceived African American deficits, generally locating the problem in black families or the students themselves. This is associated with white avoidance of black students, choosing classes judged unlikely to attract African Americans. While many whites claim to value the school’s diversity, an implied—and sometimes plainly stated—option to leave for another school clearly exists. White flight is a persistent fear for local educators, giving these parents added clout.

Lewis and Diamond frame the behavior of whites in terms of opportunity hoarding, but it is hardly clear that their use of the concept is consistent with Tilly’s classic formulation. Whites in this instance do not appear to construct barriers to resources as much as they prevail in a competitive scramble for them. Thus, it seems a tournament metaphor may be more appropriate, as described by Samuel Roundfield Lucas in his *Tracking Inequality: Stratification and Mobility in American High Schools* (1999; see Chapter 5, in particular), as well as other researchers. While Lucas found limited evidence of this opportunity hoarding using national data decades ago, it is possibly more prevalent today in institutions like Riverview. In any case, the result is largely the same: persistent racial inequity in important educational outcomes.

Lewis and Diamond have performed a valuable service in revealing essential dynamics of white advantage or privilege in a well-regarded school. Additional case studies of other institutions can build upon their insights. This book should also be widely read by educators, especially those confronted with the seeming paradox of racially dual schools within the same institution. Affirmative steps are needed to overcome the aggressive advantage-seeking

behavior of many whites in such settings and to encourage African American families and students to realize their full potential. When policies designed to accomplish these ends are undertaken on a large scale, it may be possible to realize a greater degree of racial equity in institutions such as this.