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

By A. E. Lewis and J. B. Diamond; Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015, 249 pp.

Amanda Lewis and John Diamond boldly argue that racism explains most, if not all, of racial gaps in educational outcomes in integrated schools. The authors interviewed students, parents, teachers, staff, and administrators at Riverview High, an affluent, racially diverse (about 45% white and 45% black) high school with stark racial differences in course placement, grades, test scores, and college destinations. Even though school staff are aware of these racial gaps, and intended to solve them, Lewis and Diamond argue that racial discrimination persists in student-teacher interactions, disciplinary practices, tracking assignments, and grading procedures.

The authors begin their empirical investigation by tackling a common lay explanation for achievement gaps: black students devaluing academics. Lewis and Diamond fielded a survey in Riverview and show that, contrary to the “burden of acting white” thesis, racial differences in self-reported behaviors, peer attitudes, and enjoyment of school are minimal, or in black students’ favor. In short, the lower academic achievement of black students at Riverview occurs despite them valuing educational success just as much as their white counterparts.

In subsequent chapters, the authors outline how racial discrimination impacts students’ educational lives. According to Lewis and Diamond, Riverview teachers, administrators, and staff are not blatantly racist, but they are unconsciously influenced by racial stereotypes. The upshot is they interpret the academic performance and behaviors of black students less charitably than those of white students. Lewis and Diamond amass interview reports from white and black students reporting that white students are more likely to get away with breaking school rules than black students. For example, white students could get away with roaming hallways during class time without a pass than their black peers. They also show that white and black students report that teachers tend to have higher expectations of white students. The result is that teachers and staff view black students as not belonging in high-status, academically challenging courses. In addition to black underrepresentation in advanced courses, this also produces the accumulation of damaging interpersonal interactions between teachers on the one hand, and black students and their parents on the other, the latter group aware of the former’s low expectations of them.

Lewis and Diamond’s book really shines when they present interviews with school staff showing that discrimination occurs in a more indirect way: middle-class white parents are more likely to challenge the decisions of school officials than black parents, and thus white students are able to circumvent disciplinary sanctions and tracking decisions not in their favor. Perhaps the most disturbing finding in the book are teachers and staffers confessing that they anticipate challenges from middle-class white parents and thus pre-emptively go easy on their children in terms of discipline, tracking decisions, and grades. For example, one African American teacher approached one of the authors and disclosed that she tended to worry more about her white students:

“not that she cared more about [the white students] or wanted them to excel more than her other students (if anything, the opposite was true), but that she ‘knew’ that their parents were more likely to be upset if they did not do well...she was realizing that much of the time parents did not need to come in or say anything, *just the idea that they might was powerful*” (p. 91).

Lewis and Diamond’s teacher informants go so far as to suggest that this dynamic produces grade inflation among students in higher-level courses, which black students have substantially less access to. Lewis and Diamond are not clear if this indirect mechanism is really race-based as opposed to class-based, but either way, it is a striking finding.

The authors ultimately finger white affluent parents’ lobbying efforts as getting in the way of Riverview staffers’ attempts to change their school structures to better serve black students. Such resistance torpedoes detracking efforts and subverts attempts to end weighted grading schemes (where grades in honors and Advanced Placement courses are boosted by a certain amount and contribute to racial gaps in grades).

*Despite the Best Intentions* enters a crowded field, with books by Tyson (2011), Carter (2012), Cucchiara (2013), Lewis-McCoy (2014), and Posey-Maddox (2014) discussing how schools are more responsive to white or middle-class families and thus are complicit in class and racial inequalities among their students. Taken individually, most of its insights and findings will not be surprising to educational researchers. However, the book is important for making a coherent case that discrimination is an important factor underlying racial inequalities in schooling outcomes. Educational researchers tend to shy away from naming discrimination as a major contributor to educational inequality, and Lewis and Diamond offers a pointed challenge to this way of thinking, arguing that discrimination taints major educational metrics like disciplinary infractions, track placement, and grades.

Lewis and Diamond get a lot of mileage out of the interview and survey data they collected. However, they run up against the limitations of interview data. They too often rely on their interviewees’ broad generalizations and narratives about racial discrimination occurring at Riverview High. For example, the authors quote a white male student saying,

“I’m white, so I’m expected to be smarter. Usually, when someone sees me, they always think I’m smarter than most people….I think that usually the perception is...that black people are dumber than white people, and Hispanics are not as smart as everyone else...So if you have a really smart black person, that’s when you see the most, ‘that’s weird.’ In one of my classes, there’s one black kid in the entire class; there’s zero Hispanics. It’s all white people. And that’s, it’s weird.” (Lewis and Diamond, p. 99, their ellipses)

Quotations like these, without reference to concrete incidents, are not a satisfying way to build a case. The reader wonders how much weight to assign to rough impressions of differential expectations by race. The authors say that interpersonal discrimination is an everyday occurrence at Riverview High (p. 88); systematic observation would have helped immensely to make this case. Lewis-McCoy (2014) used classroom observations and found that teachers were less likely to correct African American students than white students when they gave incorrect answers in class, supporting Lewis and Diamond’s argument about teachers’ low expectations of black students. Sometimes entire arguments in the book are built on these vague, hazy accounts (in particular, their argument about the effects of racialized tracking). At one point the authors (to their credit) acknowledge their informants’ impressions contradict each other (p. 75): one school employee says that she never sees white students brought before a disciplinary review board, while the principal says that she sees white students at review boards and comments on how vigorously their parents defend them. For some reason, Lewis and Diamond report the principal’s recollections as more truthful than those of the employee. But the discrepancy reflects the limitations of relying on informants’ general narratives of what goes on in their school.

*Despite the Best Intentions* has another limitation, one that may have been outside of the control of Lewis and Diamond. Their book emphasizes racial inequalities in access to advanced courses, but they do not tell us how much of these inequalities are explained away by students’ prior grades and test scores. To be fair, they may not have been able to obtain pre-high school achievement variables to link to high school outcomes. Other studies that have done this indicate that in schools with a similar racial balance as Riverview’s, black students are about as likely to enroll in advanced courses as white students with similar prior achievement (Kelly 2009; Southworth & Mickelson 2007). We do not know if this is the case with Riverview High, but even if it is, that would not be fatal for Lewis and Diamond’s argument, since the processes they discuss could have occurred in the elementary school years to produce racial inequalities in prior achievement.

In sum, Lewis and Diamond make a plausible case that racial discrimination in schools is the major culprit behind educational racial inequalities, and that it takes on a subtle cast and occurs “despite the best intentions” of teachers and administrators. It is not an iron-clad argument, but it is a good thing this book exists. It will be a significant contribution to the ongoing discussion about racial inequalities in education.

REFERENCES

Carter, P. (2012). *Stubborn Roots: Race, Culture, and Inequality in U.S. and South African Schools*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cucchiara, M. (2013). *Marketing schools, marketing cities: who wins and who loses when schools become urban amenities.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Kelly, S. (2009). “The Black-White Gap in Mathematics Course Taking.” *Sociology of Education* 82(1): 47-69.

Lewis-McCoy, R. L. (2014). *Inequality in the promised land: race, resources, and suburban schooling.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Posey-Maddox, L. (2014). *When Middle-Class Parents Choose Urban Schools: Class, Race, & the Challenge of Equity in Public Education*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Southworth, S., & Mickelson, R. A. (2007). “The Interactive Effects of Race, Gender and School Composition on College Track Placement.” *Social Forces* 86(2): 497-523.

Tyson, K. (2011). *Integration Interrupted: Tracking, Black Students, and Acting White After Brown.* New York: Oxford University Press.