

Book Review: Lewis, Amanda E., and John B. Diamond. *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools.* **Oxford University Press, 2015. 239 pages. Hardcover.**

Amanda E. Lewis, a sociologist specializing in race and education, and John B. Diamond, a scholar of educational inequality and leadership, brings together their complementary expertise to examine a central question: how does racial inequality persist in schools that consider themselves fair, diverse, and committed to equity? The result is an insightful and accessible analysis of a well-resourced suburban high school—pseudonymously called Riverview—where good intentions coexist with racialized disparities in tracking, discipline, expectations, and opportunity. As the authors note, Riverview is a “least likely case” for inequality, yet racial disparities there “thrive in plain sight”(xvii).

The authors investigate the “racial achievement gap” within a community that outwardly appears ideal: racially diverse, affluent, progressive, and strongly supportive of its schools. Their central argument is that inequality persists not because of overt racism but because of “mundane organizational routines” and subtle assumptions that influence daily interactions (p.14). They distinguish between the “ostensive” (official) goals of fairness and the “performative” (actual) practices that advantage white students and disadvantage Black and Latino students (p.13). This argument aligns with research on opportunity hoarding, or the ways groups protect advantages across generations.¹

One of the book’s most striking findings is the racial imbalance in Riverview’s academic tracks. The authors note that in a school with fewer than 50 percent white students, “nearly 90 percent of AP students are white” (p. xvi). These patterns emerge through teacher recommendations, parental advocacy, and unspoken assumptions about

ability. Once placed in different tracks, students receive different levels of challenge, expectations, and access to experienced teachers.

Lewis and Diamond show how discipline also contributes to unequal experiences. Teachers' interpretations of behavior often differ by race, resulting in more frequent and more severe disciplinary actions for Black and Latino students. A teacher's perception of a comment as "disrespectful" rather than "curious," the authors argue, often depends on which student made it (p.46). These interpretations accumulate over time, shaping student-teacher relationships and academic trajectories.

The authors also examine how well-intentioned white parents use their institutional knowledge and networks to secure advantages—requesting certain teachers, advocating for accelerated placement, or accessing informal information from staff. These actions, while meant to support their own children, “narrow the opportunities available to others” (p. 119). Importantly, the authors show that these parents often do not see themselves as exercising privilege; they view their actions simply as effective advocacy.

Another key theme is how local racial ideologies shape interpretation of outcomes. Although Riverview residents often describe themselves as color-blind, many rely on cultural narratives such as motivation, effort, or family values to explain disparities. These explanations, the authors argue, “naturalize inequality” (p.11) by focusing on perceived personal shortcomings rather than structural or institutional barriers.

Despite the Best Intentions stands out for its clarity, empirical strength, and thoughtful tone. Lewis and Diamond present sophisticated ideas in language that remain

accessible to both scholars and practitioners. Their case study approach allows them to capture processes often invisible in quantitative research, illustrating how racial disparities emerge through small decisions, routine practices, and unexamined assumptions. One of the book's greatest strengths is its refusal to individualize the problem. The authors do not blame teachers or parents; instead, they show how inequality develops through "race-neutral" practices that have racially patterned effects. This is a more realistic and compelling explanation of how racial inequality functions in contemporary schools.

A minor limitation is the single-district focus; some readers may wish for broader comparisons. However, the authors provide enough context and evidence from similar districts to demonstrate that Riverview exemplifies broader national patterns.

This book is particularly valuable to scholars in sociology, education, psychology, and public policy. Its integration of organizational theory, structural analysis, and social psychology makes it a strong example of mixed-methods research. Concepts such as racialized organizational routines and opportunity hoarding provide useful lenses for understanding inequality in schools and other institutions.

Overall, *Despite the Best Intentions* is a significant contribution to the study of race and education. It challenges the assumption that "good" schools are inherently equitable and demonstrates how deeply inequality can persist even in communities that value fairness. The book encourages educators, researchers, and policymakers to look beyond intentions and examine the everyday practices through which opportunity is shaped.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Tilly, C. *Durable Inequality*. University of California Press, 1999.