



September 21, 2016

ISSN 1094-5296

Lewis, A. E., & Diamond, J. B. (2015). *Despite the best intentions: How racial inequality thrives in good schools*. New York: Oxford University Press.

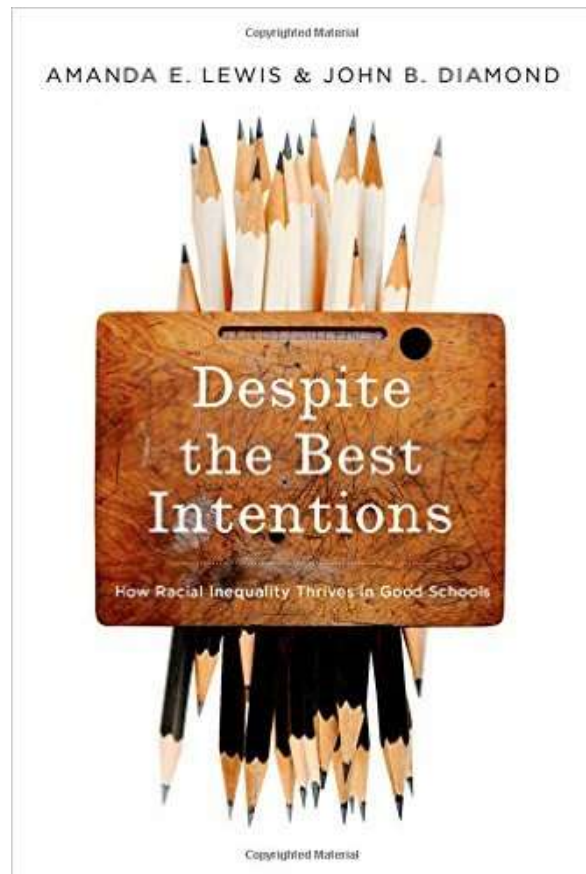
Pp. 249

ISBN: 978-0-19-534272-7

**Reviewed by Steven Drouin
California State University, Stanislaus
United States**

Co-authors Amanda E. Lewis and John B. Diamond wrote *Despite the Best Intentions* to uncover why racial disparities persist in a public high school where it would appear all students have equal opportunity to thrive. *Race in the Schoolyard*, Lewis' well known previous work, strived similarly to understand how race manifests in schools. This study, however, was particularly provocative given its context—Riverview High School, a well-funded, racially diverse, award-winning, voluntarily desegregated suburban high school, wherein the racial achievement gap continues.

Using data collected between 2003 and 2007, including interviews with over 170 members of the school community, observational data, and survey data collected at Riverview and 14 similar districts, Lewis and Diamond conclude race at Riverview operates on multiple levels, influencing how people think and interact with each other and as well as finite resources, resulting in school policies which advantage some at the cost of others. For example, the authors document how White, middle class parents



leverage their resources to increase their children's access to additional school opportunities. Such examples provide the story behind the disproportionately White AP classes documented by many other scholars in the field (Clotfelter, 2004; Lucas and Berends, 2002; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Oakes, 2005). Yet, the authors note these actions occur in ways which appear to be “race-neutral.” Such systems reinforce racial status hierarchies through daily interactions, school policies, and structural inequity, resulting in the racial achievement gap.

Of chief value to *Despite the Best Intentions* is its relentless focus on unpacking how race fostered ideological dissonance in one well-intentioned school. Through the process of excavating inequity, the authors have clearly made visible the hidden ways in which race lives on in the hallways of America's schools. Intentional racism is no longer the culprit, especially at Riverview. Instead the relatively unexamined day to day actions of teachers, students, administrators, and parents create situations where racial injustice, as one top level school administrator remarked, “just happens” (p. 111). Teachers offering differential performance expectations by means of varied time given to respond to a prompt and students referring to the two tracks as “honors White ” and “minority classes” (p. 97) are just two small contributing factors. In general, this work is about bringing together millions of such tiny interactions, to show the story of how the achievement gap does happen and persist?

Another achievement of the book is the coining of the phrase “Opportunity Hoarding.” By opportunity hoarding, the authors are referring to the practice of White parents gathering a disproportionate share of the schools' resources for the purpose of enhancing their child's school experience. Previous scholarship such a phenomena showcased parents working openly and publicly to conserve resources for their children, typically when faced with

progressive education reforms like detracking (Wells & Serna, 1996; Welner & Burris, 2006). Lewis and Diamond outline more covert, day-to-day political maneuvering by seemingly well-intentioned parents. On the one hand, most White parents at Riverview embrace diversity as an ideal. Yet even if unknowingly to them, their actions in hoarding opportunity for their own children actually builds the foundation for racial inequity at their child's school. The concept of opportunity hoarding is not new to inservice teachers nor administrators. Yet, there is tremendous power in both framing and naming such actions.

Popular explanations for the racial achievement gap are explored in light of the data collected at Riverview. Much attention is paid to the oppositional culture argument. John Ogbu (1974, 1978, & 1994) and Signithia Fordham (1986) popularized the hypothesis that involuntary minorities would create a culture of opposition in dominant cultural contexts and deem actions leading towards success in such spaces as “acting White.” These theories have become popular ways of making sense of Black -White achievement gaps and invoked often, perhaps most famously by then Senator Barack Obama at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. Using both interview and survey data, the authors test each aspect of the oppositional culture framework. For example, the oppositional culture aspect “academic behaviors” is tested against indicators such as hours spent studying at home and time spent actually paying attention in class. The authors argue their data does not support the oppositional culture argument as an explanation for the achievement gap. Instead, Black students were in many ways “more committed to educational achievement and attainment than their White counterparts” (p. 44). Furthermore, the authors' evidence highlights how Black students are bolstered by their pro-achievement orientation when facing school related inequalities.

Disciplinary processes are also unpacked as the authors carefully examine the ostensive aspect, or the ideal of a routine, and the performative aspect, or routine as practiced, to illustrate how the two reproduce racial inequality at Riverview. At the school the ostensive or idealized version of the disciplinary routine justifies itself because it is presented as all members of the faculty select, process, and discipline according to the rule. However, the performative aspect or reality of the implementation of the disciplinary routine highlights differential selection, differential processing, and differential outcomes. At Riverview, there were no overtly racist faculty and no ill will or faulty racial thinking at the root of such disparity. Instead, well intentioned people wanting to do the right thing used discipline, but did so selectively and under the influence of cultural beliefs and stereotypes about all groups.

Many groups will find much value in this important work. To a large extent, the book is relatively frightening in its revelation to teachers: “your best intentions may not be enough and may be contributing to the achievement gap.” The work provides many suggestions for targeted conversations amongst teacher to carefully examine their practice of teaching and their relationship with their students. Administrators looking for solid evidence to support reforms geared at closing the achievement gap will also find much help in this work. The authors provide specific frames for investigating inequity in schools as well as a spectrum of steps toward addressing the needs of

disenfranchised students. For scholars, this text is significant in terms of the unique context that presented racial disparity and the refutation of the oppositional culture argument.

One significant limitation to the work is that the authors’ voices do not directly address parents. Instead, Lewis and Diamond opt to suggest that administrators and teacher “challenge the in-group favoritism, opportunity hoarding, and racial apathy of parents” (p. 178). Granted, this work is not quite as parent-friendly as other texts that explore and discuss White parents and race, such as *Nurture Shock* (Bronson & Merryman, 2009). Yet, parents are crucial stakeholders in contributing to or dismantling systems and structures that create/maintain the achievement gap. The normative battle over the reforms necessary to meaningfully address the achievement gap are often won and lost in the beliefs and actions of politically active parents. Therefore, I was expecting the authors to share in the difficult task of directly challenging some of such parents’ assumptions and/or providing suggestions for how to come to terms with an ideology of individual benefit.

Despite the Best Intentions is both timely and disturbing in all of the right ways. For if the road to inequitable educational outcomes is paved with good intentions, this work provides sound reason for educators to pause and even provides a few detours towards helping educational institutions align beliefs and actions for the betterment of all students.

References


- Bronson, P., & Merryman, A. (2011) *Nurture shock: New thinking about children*. New York, NY: Twelve.
- Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students’ school success: Coping with the “Burden of Acting White.” *Urban Review*, 18, 176-206.
- Lewis, A. (2004). *Race in the schoolyard: Negotiating the color line in classrooms and communities*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

- Lucas, S., & Berends, M. (2002). Sociodemographic diversity, correlated achievement, and de facto tracking. *Sociology of Education*, 75(4), 328-348.
- Noguera, P., & Wing, J. (2006). *Unfinished business: Closing the racial achievement gap in our schools*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.
- Oakes, J. (2005). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Ogbu, J. U. (1974). *The next generation: An ethnography of education in an urban neighborhood*. New York: Academic Press
- Ogbu, J. U. (1978). *Minority education and caste*. New York: Academic Press.
- Ogbu, J. U. (1994) Racial stratification and education in the United States: Why inequality persists. *The Teachers College Record*, 96(2), 264-298.
- Welner, K. G., & Burris, C. C. (2006). Alternative approaches to the politics of detracking. *Theory Into Practice*, 45(1), 90-99.

About the Reviewer

Steven Drouin, EdD, taught high school history for nine years and is currently an assistant professor at Stanislaus State University in the Advanced Studies in Education Department. His academic interests include social studies education, heterogenous instruction, race, and detracking.



 *Education Review/Reseñas Educativas/Resenhas Educativas* is supported by the edXchange initiative's Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and ***Education Review***, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or ***Education Review***. ***Education Review*** is published by the Scholarly Communications Group of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University.

Please contribute reviews at <http://www.edrev.info/contribute.html>.

Connect with *Education Review* on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Education-Review/178358222192644>) and on Twitter @EducReview