

Book review

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Derrick Darby and John L. Rury, *The Color of Mind: Why the Origins of the Achievement Gap Matter for Justice*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2018. 224 pp. ISBN 9780226525358, \$25 (pbk)

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The Color of Mind is the latest installment in the History and Philosophy of Education series from the University of Chicago Press. The book's focus is the Black–White achievement gap in American schools. One cannot adequately understand this persistent gap, Darby and Rury argue, until one knows and understands the history that continues to inflict all varieties of dignitary harm on Black people. The authors deploy the phrase, 'color of mind', to describe the deeply embedded attitudinal and institutional norms that diminish the intellect, character, and conduct of Black students – norms with a long history that continue to poison the school system. There is, of course, no dearth of American scholarship on these themes, and the reader may be forgiven for thinking she will encounter little that isn't already known. Fortunately, however, the tack the authors take deviates in several important ways from most scholarship.

First, the authors demonstrate how American racial inequality cannot be understood apart from its European inheritance. To make their case, Darby and Rury probe the racist genealogy of some of the finest philosophical and political minds in the Western canon. The list of philosophers is a long one, from Aristotle, Hume, and Kant to Jefferson, Lincoln, and Emerson. And while their genealogy is not exhaustive (see e.g., Margonis, 2009), the historical record is clear: the greatest minds to have influenced Western philosophy, culture, and education, even when some may have publicly opposed slavery (e.g. Darwin and Mill), more often than not viewed Black and Brown people as culturally, intellectually, and morally inferior. Darby and Rury are to be commended for not sugarcoating this intellectual history, for not glossing its continued influence on our school systems in the present era, and finally for not excusing these individuals for being mere 'products of their time'.

Second, the authors substantiate the claim that 'state authorities played a major role in prescribing patterns of racially inferior and unequal schooling, premised on the Color of Mind' (p. 55). In other words, the public school system was designed from the beginning as a racist institution, one that viewed Blacks as at best charity cases rather than equal citizens long after the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the

Constitution were ratified. Thus the only way to solve the so-called achievement gap is to discredit and abandon the 'qualified egalitarian thinking' that has produced so much dignitary harm. They elucidate the idea of qualified egalitarianism this way: 'For ancient, early modern, and contemporary egalitarians alike, the basis of placing people into natural or artificial hierarchies has often entailed deliberate and conscious contrivance. The generic egalitarian imperative to treat people differently has always been qualified and tethered to an understanding of status' (p. 32). Justice, they contend, demands that we relate to one another as equals not in some 'qualified' sense – that is, in terms of our public pronouncements about equality belied by our implicit biases, prejudices, fears and discriminatory institutional norms – but rather in moral, social, political, and legal terms, as it were, all the way down.

Third, Darby and Rury share with other scholars the view that schools cannot compensate for poverty, teen pregnancy, unemployment, crime, involuntary segregation, police violence, and political neglect. They also implicitly agree with the general thrust of James Coleman's 1966 report, which maintained the school's inability to compensate for family background, even when funding levels are adequate, and both mobility rates and teacher attrition is low. But the authors also join a growing chorus of scholars – this author included – who are distrustful of the usual educational 'remedies' to the achievement gap offered up by liberal educational scholars and policymakers. They single out integration idealists. The *Color of Mind*, they remind us, 'still thrives in well-funded, desegregated schools' (p. 142). Indeed, it 'has proved to be quite resilient, despite decades of struggle to achieve it' (p. 99). 'The historical record, extending from the success of desegregation to the backlash against busing and stalled progress on the racial achievement gap, demonstrates that simply putting people together is insufficient to combat dignitary injustice' (p. 109).

Darby and Rury do not espouse the view that schools have no constructive role to play. Nor do they deny the importance of strong leadership, smaller class size, and positive school climate. They do not discount the importance of concrete attempts to curb injustice by listening to the concerns of parents and other third parties; by routinely collecting and disseminating achievement data; by eliminating low track classes; and by ensuring equitable funding. At the end of the day the authors hope that by examining the racial dimensions of inequality we might move one step closer to 'to [creating] institutions based on perfect social equality where dignitary injustice no longer prevails within K-12 schools'.

Nevertheless, they discerningly observe that none of these efforts is likely to produce much in the way of educational justice unless and until the pernicious racism embedded in the *Color of Mind*, which produces dignitary harms to Black (and other stigmatized) children, is eradicated, root and branch. This racist ideology, they argue, lies inconspicuously embedded in the 'systemic everyday school practices' that sustain the *Color of Mind*, perhaps most especially in 'integrated' schools: grouping and tracking norms; curricular differentiation; labeling and referrals for special education (in particular the more stigmatizing learning disability and emotional disorder labels); and discipline and expulsion practices that disproportionately harm Black and Brown children. Until we dismantle these pervasive institutional norms, they insist, we should not expect much in the way of educational justice. And because they focus on the dignitary harms these

institutional practices produce, they remind the reader that the most meaningful measures necessary for closing the Black–White achievement gap do not require a massive windfall of resources.

Given the book's title and theme, it is reasonable to assume that most readers will be those already convinced of its premises, in particular critical race scholars amenable to candid discussions about the relationship between White supremacist thinking and educational inequality. But it would be a shame if this book were read only by those already 'in the know'. It would equally be a shame if the book's genealogical approach were to suggest to non-American readers that the Color of Mind is a uniquely American phenomenon. Given the intellectual and cultural genealogy of White supremacy that the authors document, educational inequality scholarship in continental Europe in particular is desperately in need of analyses of this kind. Its virtual absence feeds the ignorance that continental Europe does not have a Color of Mind problem in its schools and societies – or for that matter, in its universities, which largely ignores racism as an explanatory variable for persistent inequality. Hence, though it was not the authors' intention to shed light on institutionally racist thinking outside of the United States, for those with eyes to see, this book also issues an invitation to begin moving in that direction. It is long overdue.

Reference

Margonis F (2009) John Dewey's racialized visions of the student and classroom community. *Educational Theory* 59(1): 17–39.