

11-2018

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Recommended Citation

Ingle, Jeanne (2018). Book Review - Dignity, Justice and Real Achievement: Derrick Darby and John L. Rury, *The Color of Mind: Why the Origins of the Achievement Gap Matter for Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). *Bridgewater Review*, 37(2), 37-38.
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol37/iss2/12

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Dignity, Justice and Real Achievement

Jeanne Ingle

Derrick Darby and John L. Rury, *The Color of Mind: Why the Origins of the Achievement Gap Matter for Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

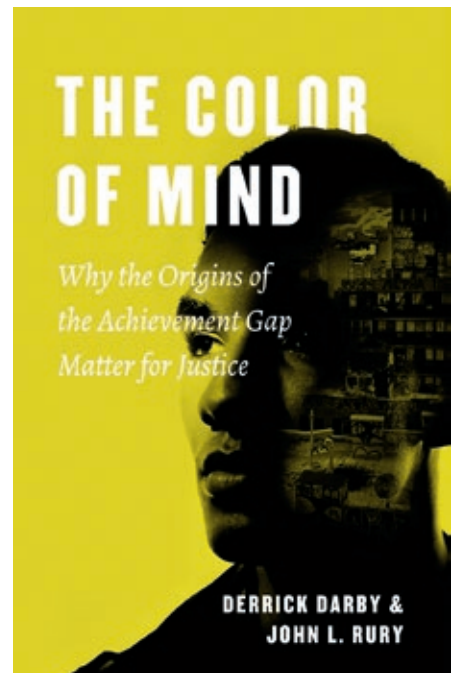
The *Color of Mind* is a gift to educators and future educators who seek to understand inequality in our schools and the persistence of institutional racism. Teachers work hard. Teachers in inner city schools work exceptionally hard, 50–60 hours per week on average. To work so hard and to see your students not achieve on standardized tests is extremely frustrating, but the day-to-day achievements are amazing, invigorating, and what makes it all worthwhile. I know this because I was an inner-city teacher and I have had experiences just like those highlighted in Darby and Rury’s book.

Sebastian came to my fourth grade classroom in the second half of the school year. He was bright, creative, and extremely impulsive. On his first day of school we were prepping for the high stakes state testing that my students would begin the following week. He had a rocky first week, and I spent a lot of time on the phone with his mom discussing his needs, his past performance, and anything else I might need to know. I found out that Sebastian and his family had recently been evicted, that they had moved across the state to live with an aunt, and that his mom was trying to leave an abusive relationship behind. I also found out that Sebastian was a wonderful artist, a significantly below-grade-level reader, and a pretty strong student in math. He was also funny, sweet, and harbored an explosive temper. You might be wondering if I spoke with Sebastian’s former teacher. I did, but he couldn’t help me much since

Sebastian had only been in his room for three months – Sebastian’s family was in crisis. In Sebastian’s second week in my class we began four days of standardized testing that would have multiple implications for Sebastian, our school, our school district, and me.

Fast forward to the following summer when I received Sebastian’s scores (that’s right, teachers don’t often get their students’ standardized scores for months following the actual testing). Unsurprisingly, Sebastian did poorly in almost every area. Not because of Sebastian, but because we had so many children like Sebastian, our test scores as a school and as a district were also poor. Five years after Sebastian left my classroom, the school district continues to fail.

Sebastian was complicated, but also a delight to work with. He loved drawing, especially cartooning. He would



create extensive illustrations of whatever book we were reading in class; he made a series of drawings depicting what the Titanic might look like if built today, including a gaming room, basketball court, and a minutely detailed food court. How does this creativity and life experience get measured in our current system of achievement testing? Short answer: it doesn’t.

As a former inner-city teacher, I found *The Color of Mind* neither easy to read nor shocking in its revelations. Racism is old and deeply entrenched in Western culture. “The Color of Mind” is a term Darby and Rury use to describe the “construction of racial differences in intellect, character and conduct, ... and its role in establishing racial inequality of educational opportunities and other opportunity gaps, has had a profound impact in shaping the racial achievement gap” (142). *The Color of Mind* is a systematic racist view of black people’s intelligence, performance and abilities. It is not a new view invented by white supremacists, the KKK, or even Southern slaveholders. *The Color of Mind* is as old as the first European/African encounters and is well articulated in the work of Kant, Hume, and Thomas Jefferson.

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The book meticulously documents the cultural and societal programs that have maintained *The Color of Mind* so that it permeates every aspect of our society, and nowhere so glaringly or so profoundly as our educational system. To understand the achievement gap between white students and black students in this country, Darby and Rury argue that it is necessary to understand that current educational failings are deeply rooted in the philosophical and political history of the United States. Racial bias and white dismissiveness of black intellectual ability are part of our origin story and drive the programs we utilize today to educate our children.

The achievement gap traditionally measures the difference between black and white student academic achievement. Darby and Rury cite data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly known as “The Nations Report Card.” NAEP measures student achievement in math, reading, and science at ages 9, 13, and 17. The overall academic achievement gap between black and white students is approximately 30 percentage points (19). *The Color of Mind* goes beyond academic performance to include the alarming statistics that black students are three times more likely to be suspended from school than white students and are twice as likely to drop out than white students. I agree with the authors

that all these statistics taken together are the real measure of the black/white achievement gap. It is nothing short of frightening.

I once went with another student, Luis, and his mom to a disciplinary meeting. Luis had gotten into a fight on the playground. I don’t know whether he started the fight or not, but he definitely hit another child. Luis’ mom was upset. She lashed out at the school psychologist, saying that her son needed support, that he wasn’t a bad person—everything a mother would say to defend her child. After the meeting the school psychologist looked at me and said, “Apple, tree – what can you expect from that kind of background.” I thought of that story as I read Darby and Rury’s discussion of “No Child Left Behind,” “Zero Tolerance” and other flawed and failed programs. Luis was expelled for *three* days – three days without instruction, three days to fuel his anger and three days that would remain in his academic file and label him. All for a two-minute playground event when he was ten years old.

Understanding that racism was justified by the Ancient Greeks, secured in European culture, and planted and cultivated in our country is sobering. Darby and Rury review and retell this history of qualified egalitarianism which began with Aristotle’s view

of “natural slaves” and continues to Jefferson’s ideal that “all *men* are created equal.” They argue that neither No Child Left Behind or nor even Plessy vs. Ferguson caused the achievement gap; but rather the view that there is a natural hierarchy is deeply embedded in our culture and our history. All men may be created equal but that equality depends on how you define a man or a person. “Qualified egalitarianism thus is a useful conceptual framework for making sense of the long-standing socially and legally constructed racial patterns of unequal treatment and opportunity in America” (32).

With this kind of historical depth and societal foundation it is easy to wonder if anything can be done. Darby and Rury present *The Color of Mind Index* (150), an accountability tool that asks educators to measure the number of black students expelled, placed in special education, or tracked into remedial classes. The higher the ratio of black to white students in these areas, the higher the indignity to these children. In the end it is dignitary justice that *The Color of Mind* argues for, and it is dignitary justice that we as educators must champion. The authors bring their unique blend of historical and philosophical viewpoints to the fore as they examine with skill and readability the past and present of education.

Student names are replaced with pseudonyms in this review to protect the privacy of those mentioned.



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