

## The Color of Mind: Why the Origins of the Achievement Gap Matter for Justice

reviewed by Jeffrey Aaron Snyder – September 21, 2018

**Title:** The Color of Mind: Why the Origins of the Achievement Gap Matter for Justice

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“Our ignorance is pleaded as a reason for withholding our rights, while knowledge itself has been locked up from us” (p. 73). So said Frederick Douglass in 1849. More than a century and a half later, perceptions of racial inferiority continue to limit educational opportunities for African Americans. This is the central claim of the new book *The Color of Mind: Why the Origins of the Achievement Gap Matter for Justice*.

Co-authored by philosopher Derrick Darby and historian John L. Rury, *Color of Mind* is part of the excellent *History of Education and Philosophy* series published by the University of Chicago Press. Other books in the series focus on illuminating the nature of controversies surrounding the teaching of religion, evolution, and patriotism in public schools.

*The Color of Mind*, according to Darby and Rury, is an ideology based on the premise that blacks are not equal to whites in “intelligence, character, or conduct” (pp. 1-2). It is, they contend, the “rotten foundation of black-white educational achievement gaps and educational opportunity gaps” (p. 2), justifying the systemic school policies and practices that “sort, segregate, and stigmatize” black students (p. 14).

Darby and Rury weave together the following three strands to articulate their *Color of Mind* concept: First, a brief intellectual genealogy of “the black image in the white mind,” from Enlightenment philosophy to World War I era IQ testing and the 1994 book *The Bell Curve*. Second, a historical overview of education for African Americans, including slavery and segregated Jim Crow schools as well as the epochal *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and its tortuous aftermath. And third, philosophical reflections on how schools perpetuate what the authors call “dignitary injustice”; when blacks and whites are prevented from “relating as equals,” the authors assert, schools fail to “recognize the equal dignity of all persons” (p. 3).

Originally grounded in assumptions about innate racial inferiority, the *Color of Mind* discourse took a cultural turn in the 1960s, reframing racial differences in terms of “behavior and values” rather than biology and genetics (p. 82). The 1965 Moynihan Report was pivotal in this regard. It depicted black urban families as suffering from a “tangle of pathology,” arguing that the achievement gap stemmed from inadequate home lives where children were not exposed to the kind of stimulation and socialization necessary to succeed in school.

Attributing the achievement gap to culture rather than heredity has not resulted in significantly improved educational outcomes for African Americans according to Darby and Rury. In a valuable chapter called “Old Poison in New Bottles: How the Color of Mind Thrives in Schools and Affects Achievement,” the authors present a clear picture of contemporary racial disparities in academic tracking, school discipline, and special education diagnoses. African Americans, the authors report, are underrepresented in classes “with the highest status, the best teachers, and the most challenging intellectual tasks” (p. 118). They are also three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than whites (p. 119). Discretionary disciplinary policies pertaining to “excessive noise” and “disrespect” are especially unequally applied to African American students (p. 121). With respect to special education, black students are more likely to be diagnosed with “intractable” emotional disorders. Whites, on the other hand, are more likely to be diagnosed with learning disabilities that are seen as responsive to treatment. All of these dramatic racial disparities, the authors contend, create destructive school climates that repeatedly “assail black dignity” (p. 127).

Like many books that deal with the concept of race, the authors reinforce the common perception that race in the United States is a black and white affair. Hispanics, for instance, are barely mentioned at all, in spite of the fact that they are the [fastest growing](#) demographic group besides Asians. Of the [some 51 million public school students in the United States](#), 8 million are black while more than 13.5 million are Hispanic. Achievement gaps between Hispanics and whites across a wide range of educational outcomes, from test scores to graduation rates, are well known and amply documented. Are these disparities similarly informed and driven by racial beliefs? For the *Color of Mind* thesis to have sharper explanatory power, it would need to incorporate other ethno-racial groups beyond blacks and whites.

Racial mixing in schools, the authors rightfully insist, is clearly not sufficient to address the black-white achievement and opportunity gaps. Educators must challenge the unfair sorting and disciplinary practices that happen inside schools, and must also work to expel

the Color of Mind from their classrooms and offices. While not providing a detailed blueprint for this challenging undertaking, Darby and Rury insist on the importance of documenting racial disparities and identify detracking as an especially promising policy initiative.

Color of Mind focuses on ameliorating the black-white achievement gap within racially integrated schools. But two in three black students today attend [segregated schools](#) (defined as institutions where less than 40% of students are white), and 15% are enrolled in so-called [apartheid schools](#) where whites make up less than 1% of the enrollment. I wonder how Darby and Rury would explain the black-white achievement gap across different schools. In racially mixed schools, the Color of Mind sorts and segregates. What role might it play in schools that are already segregated?

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