

Suddenly Diverse: How School Districts Manage Race and Inequality

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Suddenly Diverse: How School Districts Manage Race and Inequality

by Turner, E. O. (2020). *Suddenly Diverse: How School Districts Manage Race and Inequality*. University of Chicago Press. 92 pages, Cost: \$82.50
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Review by

Shezadi Khushal

Suddenly Diverse: How School Districts Manage Race and Inequality is an ethnographic account of two school districts in Wisconsin, United States. In a response to the growing and concerning issue around migration, immigration and racial and ethnic diversity, Erica O. Turner's book speaks to a critical issue of deeply rooted discriminatory practices.

Based on observations and interviews with 37 public school district leaders from the period 2009–2010, *Suddenly Diverse* highlights the challenges and contradictions that both school districts faced. The book contributes to the study of inequality, ineffective leadership practices and racial sensemaking influencing education policy. Through the lens of policy-making, leadership and colour-blind managerialism, the author analyzes how the two school districts respond to the rapidly changing demographics at their schools, and how they attempted to solve inequities with new managerial approaches.

Chapter 1 describes the changing context in two school districts, Milltown (a working class, conservative community) and Fairview (a middle class, affluent, liberal community) due to globalization and immigration, the changing economy, and budget cuts, which make it difficult for the school districts to address the academic needs of students.

Chapter 2 investigates 'white flight', the movement of families into better neighbourhood schools, which creates a separate and an unequal system of education in which some schools face challenges of funding, academic performance and poverty. Due to

rapidly changing demographics, the district leaders were at a loss for how they could effectively handle these shifts. Despite their publicly voiced intentions to promote diversity, additional pressure from dominant white groups to “maintain the status quo” lead district leaders to adopt policies and practices that perpetuated existing inequalities. One such policy, “new managerialism” ran schools like businesses and embedded neo-liberal principles into their administration.

Chapter 3 delves deep into the multiple challenges the schools faced: demographic changes, the failure to recognize transiency of low-income student populations, deeply rooted structural racism, poverty, educational inequalities in student learning and achievement, and the end of race-conscious professional development for teachers. Through examining measures of standardized testing, achievement gaps, disparity analyses, accountability pressures, teacher resistance and limited resources, the principal aim was to manage accountability through monitoring achievement gaps.

Chapter 4 covers examines multiple issues: maintaining the status quo of white families, global cosmopolitanism, racial capital, introduction of International Baccalaureate and dual language immersion programs, and an open enrollment and inter-district transfer program which allowed students to attend schools outside of their district. Such transfers undermined finances, estimated at a loss of 6 million dollars U.S. per school (p.123). In response, a plan to promote and ‘market’ diversity was created. Through its marketing plan, leadership attempted to convey a perception of racial awareness and inclusion. It however, achieved the opposite, further perpetuating racial inequalities.

The concluding chapter opens with a thought provoking question: *How well do we live the reality?*, referring to the ways in which the school districts were responding to “educating a more diverse and unequal student population, while under the pressures of high-stakes accountability policies, heightened competition, and states disinvestment in schools” (p. 145). The author once again illustrates the limitations experienced by school district leadership due to powerful constituencies and local pressures. “While public schools are expected to transform society, their ability to do so is constrained by their dependence on those who want to maintain the status quo of colour-blind racism and economic inequality” (p. 151). The chapter also addresses issues of resistance and whiteness, but emphasizes institutional-level change over individual attitudes. Finally, Turner offers a way forward by looking at the racial project of school governance incorporating a social justice lens (p. 154).

Suddenly Diverse is comprehensive and well written. It does however use terms and concepts which are not generally known and easily accessible to the general population. The title can be somewhat misleading in that ‘suddenly’ diverse can infer that the demographic shift was sudden, when in fact ‘sudden’ refers to the response and resistance to change by school district leadership. The book concedes three critical points: (1) school district leaders did not reflect the school population it served; (2) leaders did not go deep enough to understand race; and (3) policies did not evolve with the changing needs of society. Although written from an American educational context and written a decade ago, all three factors are relevant to the challenges and pressures currently confronting Canadian public education systems.

The book has some salient strengths. Through its use of multiple voices and perspectives, at various levels across the organization, we see an evolution and change taking place in the schools. The author’s use of a variety of research methodologies adds to the richness of this book. Ethnographic and qualitative methodology are used. The findings draw research from case studies, interviews, participant feedback and document analysis. Data was collected from school level staff, school district administrators, school board members, school staff, parents, community leaders, observations during staff meetings and finally, a compilation of 270 documentary materials, including reports, policies, newspaper, blogs, meeting agendas, board minutes and school improvement plans. I appreciate Turner’s acknowledgement of her privilege and positionality in her research as it “influences how research is conducted, its outcomes, and its results” (Rowe, 2014).

Although diverse in multiple voices among educational stakeholders, student and parent voice could have been more prominent. While the book talks about how data, achievement gaps and testing created new forms of racism, it did not provide alternatives. Turner fails to consider how colour-blind managerialism in the Milltown and Fairview cases fit into larger contexts of educational and correctional privatization and the school-to-prison pipeline in the U.S. Lastly, Turner does not investigate other characteristics of leadership that could contribute to effective change in the schools.

Suddenly Diverse underscores the relationship between race, equity and the future of public education. Through tracing two U.S. school districts, the book reveals significant pressures, inherent contradictions and daunting challenges. This work is complex, and is established within grounded theory research methodology. It targets a large audience, from educators to school administration to leadership. I would argue it is also beneficial

for researchers, scholars, and policy makers. It is however, a starting point to larger conversations that need to occur around deeply rooted structural racism, leadership and policy producing educational inequalities. Upon reflection, I am left with one burning question: *How can educators and leaders use their professional and cultural capital to gain agency and support capacity building at the micro-level to support educational reform?*

References

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