

Suddenly Diverse: How School Districts Manage Race and Inequality, by Erica O. Turner. University of Chicago Press, 2020, 192pps, \$27.50, (paperback)

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Erica O. Turner's *Suddenly Diverse: How School Districts Manage Race and Inequality* is a timely exploration of the ways smaller school districts use neoliberal methods to manage the inevitable influx of diverse student populations while also attempting to maintain viability as a public resource. Turner uses ethnographic and interview data collected in 2009 and 2010 to compare the managerial practices of school administrators from two politically opposed school districts in Wisconsin. Turner finds that the majority white school administrators in her study use color-blind managerialism — managerial practices that embrace color-blind logics for issues of racial equity — to negotiate between the interest of their white constituents and the incoming minoritized students; most of whom are also low income. *Suddenly Diverse* takes a critical look at the ways smaller school districts respond to diverse populations and connects that response to the larger landscape of U.S. race relations.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the social, economic, and political shifts in Milltown and Fairview which set the stage for the adaptation of color-blind managerialism. School board officials contend with the tension of attempting to “foster equality and democracy” while simultaneously being “dependent upon and limited by dominant groups that want to maintain their advantages” (p.3). This chapter connects the local changes described above to the larger issues of race and class inequality in the United States. State level divestment from public schools and rising cost lead school districts to become highly dependent on their majority white constituents to the detriment of their newly diverse population. Turner's reflexivity is apparent in this book as she offers her positionality statement in the introduction and her narrative voice invites the reader with her throughout the investigation.

Chapter 2 explores the sensemaking of school district leaders as they fearfully took on the title “urban school system” while balancing growing poverty, racial-ethnic diversity, failing schools and budgetary crisis. While facing this multitude of obstacles, administrators “fixed their anxieties about these changes on the arrival of people of color, and on racist ‘white flight’” (p.64). Their fixation on becoming urban meant that administrators wrongly attributed certain changes in the district to the incoming diverse populations and not the nationwide political and economic uncertainty following the Great Recession. Turner's analysis cleverly interweaves various literature on structural racism to situate colorblind managerialism as an ever-shifting racial project.

In chapter 3, Turner positions color-blind managerialism as the “organizational form of neoliberalism” which emphasizes, “market-based mechanisms, and the blurring of the lines between public and private as a means for guiding public organizations and solving social problems” (p.24). After blaming teachers for the achievement gap between white and racially minoritized students and failing to implement cultural competency professional trainings (due to backlash from white teachers), administrators in this study turned to high stakes testing and data monitoring. Turner argues the practice high stakes testing is also known to further marginalize students of color which is the case in both districts. Turner acknowledges the role of teachers in achievement gaps in classrooms while maintaining school administrators as her central focus, however, this chapter might minimize the importance of culturally competent teachers in racially equitable education.

In chapter 4, Turner explores the ways school districts reframe their influx of diverse student populations as a beneficial component of the educational experience. To calm the apprehension of white middle-class families and curb the threat of white flight, administrators needed to reshape the narrative around their newly diverse and urban image using marketing. Diversity was marketed as a benefit to white students and resulted in programming such as an International Baccalaureate (IB) program and dual language immersion. Diversity promotion in this way is an example of official anti-racisms “which gesture at antiracism but do little to challenge or deconstruct existing systems of oppression” (p.26). This chapter is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the function of interest convergence in school politics as well as the ways administrators manage schools using business strategies like marketing to compete with other school districts for resources.

Turner concludes with recommendations for more equitable education reform for school districts facing similar circumstances to Fairview and Milltown. She proposes that district leaders become more involved in the intervention in broader issues which affect the schooling experience. To ensure that equitable education centers marginalized voices, she recommends community-involved book discussions of works such as Lewis and Diamond’s (2015) *Despite the Best Intentions* as well as equity audits to avoid repeating the pitfalls of colorblind data monitoring. I find that the social implications for Turner’s work are greater than her recommendations, her analysis of colorblind managerialism is a challenge to diversity and inclusion initiatives at every education level.

Turner’s work contributes to the study of education policy and inequality by furthering our understanding of the ways public school administrators “transform and maintain social inequities” within the context of shifting racial and economic demographics (p.145). She charges administrators to realize that utilizing a color-blind approach to remedying issues such as failing schools and budgetary crisis further marginalizes diverse populations. Throughout the book at times the writing gets somewhat repetitious as Turner reminds the reader of her central thesis. This book is essential for community leaders, educators, and school board administrators who advocate for education equity and want to be aware of the ways systems reinvent and reinforce racial inequality masked as post-racial progress.

### **References:**

Lewis, A. E., & Diamond, J. B. (2015). *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools*. Oxford University Press.