

Book Review

Those kids, our schools: Race and reform in an American high school. By S. R. Griffin. Harvard Education Press: Cambridge, 2015.

Reviewed by Alexander Hyres, University of Virginia

The achievement gap between White students and students of color has garnered significant attention by federal politicians and policymakers as far back as Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, and more recently in Congress's No Child Left Behind legislation and Barack Obama's Race to the Top initiative. Although these top-down federal programs, laws, and initiatives have attempted to close the gap, the disparities persist. In addition to a longstanding focus on the achievement gap, recent scholars (Gregory, Noguera & Skiba, 2010; Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, & Tobin, 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002) have illuminated the discipline gap between White students and students of color. Politicians, policymakers, and educators have only just begun to grapple with this gap. Although some argue that integrated schools would close—or even erase—both gaps, Shayla Reese Griffin offers a cautionary account in *Those Kids, Our Schools: Race and Reform in an American High School* (2015).

In *Those Kids, Our Schools*, Griffin reveals the findings of her three-year ethnographic study analyzing the achievement and discipline gaps at Jefferson High School (JHS), located in a Midwestern exurb, to illustrate how the gaps manifest and possible strategies for overcoming them. Exurbs, or outer ring suburbs, are home to the majority of Americans and constitute the fastest-growing suburb type. Exurb schools are more diverse and better integrated than their urban counterparts (Frey, 2011; Hall & Lee, 2010). Nevertheless, Griffin (2015) asserts, "Despite having a student population that civil rights activists had only dreamed about, Jefferson struggled with issues of race, not just test scores and student achievement, but also in the relationship between students, staff, and community members" (p. 2). In other words, integration alone could not overcome achievement and discipline gaps. Regarding achievement, Griffin observes, "black students [at JHS] still underperformed on every subject area of the state standardized test when compared to white students" (p. 8). Regarding discipline, Griffin notes, "black students [during the 2006–2007 school year] made up only 32 percent of the high school but constituted 47 percent of the suspensions" and "blacks were more likely [than white students] to get in trouble" when they engaged in similar objectionable behaviors (Griffin, 2015, p. 166). Unfortunately, the book will disappoint individuals seeking simple answers to overcoming these gaps. However, those seeking complexity and nuance will be endowed with a deeper understanding and some practical strategies for narrowing them.

Griffin's ability to account for the school's multiple perspectives represents the book's greatest strength. She divides the book into four sections, with the first three explicating and interrogating the student, teacher, and administrator perspectives. Mirroring many Americans, the JHS students claim to live in a post-racial world. Griffin illuminates such a claim's paradoxical nature by examining how racial humor functions on a micro level. A post-racial world at JHS, according to Griffin (2015), means students were "a part of a generation in which white people had permission to say biased, bigoted, prejudiced, discriminatory, and oppressive things with smiles on their faces and people of color did not have permission to be offended by it" (p. 49). Notwithstanding the students' belief that they were beyond race, Griffin finds the opposite in her observations and interviews with students. Not only is White privilege reified through humor amongst students, but school space segregation also instantiates student division. Griffin notes hyper segregation at the lunch table and in the lunchroom to disrupt the notion that all students were beyond race. If students were actually post-racial, one would expect them to socially engage across racial boundaries. Instead, Griffin (2015) argues, "they were *hyperracial*—concerned with how race limited their friendships, shaped their interactions, and dominated their discourse" (p. 94, italics in original). Students' aim to avoid discussing or acknowledging race did not unmake race at JHS.

The JHS teachers seem no better than students at mitigating, let alone combating, racial inequality. While JHS's student population was thirty percent students of color, the teaching faculty was ninety percent White. Not only do the teachers "hear and see no evil" regarding racial issues at the school, but they also shy away from race by reframing achievement and discipline issues through a class lens. Griffin (2015) observes,

In order to acknowledge that race was a factor in achievement and discipline, JHS teachers would have had to accept that schools were biased against students based on race—an immutable identity—or worse, that they themselves were. In contrast, if poverty were the issue, they could blame marginalized students, parents, and communities for not working hard enough or not caring enough about education. (p. 150)

Teachers avoided discussing race amongst themselves and with students because by doing so they could become complicit in the achievement gap. By reframing the achievement gap as a class issue, the teachers limited their complicity in students' successes and failures. Based on these findings alone, it is not hard to see how these gaps persist.

The school's administrators also fail to counteract JHS's racial inequality. One reason for the school administration's struggle with narrowing achievement and discipline gaps was the constant turnover in the principal's office. Historically, JHS's principals often spent just a few years at the school before moving on. District officials moved principals around to different schools or principals relocated for opportunities in other school districts. One particularly illuminating chapter in this section elucidates how the lack of diversity in the school's teaching corps and administration influenced discussions related to race. Griffin (2015) concludes, "It [white privilege] meant that in a district in which students of color made up 35 percent of the student body and underperformed in every area of the

state standardized test, it was acceptable to say there were no race problems, save for the ones black people brought on themselves” (p. 177). Similar to the teachers who blamed students for their own failures in school, the administrators—predominantly White and appointed to the principal and assistant principal positions—ignored and, oftentimes, exacerbated racial inequality.

In the book’s fourth and final section, Griffin leaves readers with some practical strategies for closing the achievement and disciplinary gaps. During her time at the school, she facilitated structured conversations about race with some of the school’s teachers and students. On the one hand, these discussions illustrated the potential for overcoming racial inequality. The conversations resulted in teachers better understanding their students’ perspectives. Additionally, the teachers reflected on their practice integrating a racial lens. Teachers “made concrete changes in how they responded to racial bullying between students and how they approached their curriculum and lesson planning” (Griffin, 2015, p. 221). On the other hand, these discussions laid bare the overall lack of space and time to grapple with JHS’s racial issues. Griffin’s work at the school provides a good model for discussing a school’s racial inequality but, given the highly contextualized nature of schools, is not a panacea for dealing with all schools’ racial inequality. Griffin could address the JHS’s racial inequality because she possessed deep local knowledge and trust with students, teachers, and administrators. Acquiring local knowledge and cultivating trust requires time and commitment. Moreover, schools should not be alone in this work. Without concomitant changes in society regarding racial oppression, schools will continue falling short in combating racial inequality.

Although the book provides a robust and extensive account of how racial inequality operates at the school level, the narrow focus on a single school could leave some readers questioning the findings’ transferability. Critics may say the school is merely an aberration in a largely post-racial nation exhibited by the nation’s first African American president. While I agree Griffin’s findings should be interrogated about their broader transferability in future research, I also believe her book challenges teachers, administrators, policymakers, and politicians to dig deeper into the achievement gaps identified via quantitative analysis. Rather than dismissing the book due to its narrow scope, future research should probe Griffin’s findings and their applicability to other contexts.

Despite the book’s narrow focus, teachers and administrators in all schools with diverse populations would benefit from Griffin’s book. *Those Kids, Our Schools* possesses deep relevance for students, teachers, administrators, and educational researchers across the United States. Griffin’s analysis regarding achievement and discipline gaps should inform and influence discussions about how schools should deal with racial inequality. On a final note, based on the Griffin’s findings, the hope and expectation for a post-racial society should be abandoned—especially in schools. Instead, students, teachers, and administrators should stop evading race as a possible reason for achievement and discipline disparities. Grappling with race may be uncomfortable but, as Griffin displays in the book’s final section, it is possible and worthwhile. The alternative—living the fiction of a post-racial society—leaves behind a significant and growing part of America’s future.

References

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