

4-2019

White Plight: A Review of *White Kids: Growing Up With Privilege in A Racially Divided America*

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Recommended Citation

Farmer, Angela S. (2019) "White Plight: A Review of *White Kids: Growing Up With Privilege in A Racially Divided America*," *Journal of Research Initiatives*: Vol. 4 : No. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri/vol4/iss2/8>

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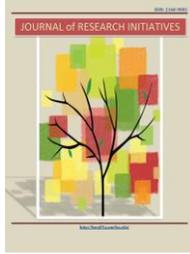
About the Author(s)

Dr. Angela S. Farmer is an Assistant Clinical Professor in the Honors College at Mississippi State University where she teaches courses on leadership, focused on underrepresented groups, as well as aspects of the natural sciences to stimulate discussion and enhance understanding among the honors student populace.

A lifelong educator, Farmer spent her early career as a scientist, a science teacher, and an educational administrator before matriculating into higher education where she continues to follow her passion to expanding students' learning.

Keywords

inequities, white privilege, power, race



WHITE PLIGHT: A REVIEW OF *WHITE KIDS: GROWING UP WITH PRIVILEGE IN A RACIALLY DIVIDED AMERICA*

Margaret A. Hagerman. *White Kids: Growing Up with Privilege in a Racially Divided America*. New York: New York University Press. (2018). pp 280. \$ 28.16 (hardcopy). ISBN: 978-1479803682.

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The United States of America offers the promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. However, even as fellow Americans find themselves firmly ensconced in the 21st century, it is clear that equality of opportunity is not available for all. In newly published, "White Kids" (Hagerman, 2018), unveils the reality witnessed daily in schools across the nation. Some children are afforded enhanced benefits based on the school they attend and the settings in which they are raised. Rather than allowing this evidence to stand alone; however, the author spends years with a group of students who attend a variety of school settings to better understand how they see themselves in the larger social context as well as how their perceptions compare with their parents through the course of the examination. "White Kids" offers a compelling presentation of how race and privilege are often co-mingled such that a thorough examination of one facet requires an understanding of the other in order to fully expose the complex social dilemma which currently exists in the United States.

While evidences abound in the 21st century as to the frequency and complexity of racial stresses within the United States, one book, "White Kids" (Hagerman, 2018), portrays the issue in a most unexpected and refreshing context. Rather than expounding upon the ineffective way the current power brokers in society, namely the adults of today's generation, have sought to recognize and improve race relations, this book addresses the situation from the viewpoint of some of tomorrow's leaders, namely middle school students. It follows a fixed set of white students for several years to understand how they view racial differences, what they recognize as inequity, and how they propose to improve the situation for future generations.

What unfolds during the book requires readers to acknowledge that many of the perceptions that students hold are foundational in the setting in which they are raised as well as the actions and voices of their parents. However, as the students aged in the narrative, so too did many of their opinions as to the issue of race and how it impacts society, not just their small ecosystem of community and school.

Early in the narratives, readers witness parents and students who imagine that race was no longer a significant issue in the overall scheme of a school setting. Many of their voices echoed that of privilege and power, seemingly unaware that their blindness to the issue is itself a grand part of the discourse. Furthermore, as the author unpacks how selected families (followed for this book) elected to live in certain areas within the given metropolitan, suburban landscape does much to reinforce the innate biases they either covet or actively work to destroy. For example, certain white families intentionally choose to live in a more diverse neighborhood to surround their children with a more realistic perspective on the world and to ensure that their

children are less likely to see themselves as elitist and more inclined to adapt to various cultures, experiences, and alternative viewpoints. One parent interviewed in the book explains her family's choice in the following narrative.

I wanted my kids to not go to a homogeneous school...I remember Robert starting Kindergarten...his class was 15 kids, so very small, and there was literally – it was the most diverse group...The diversity was celebrated rather than ignored, you know (p. 46-47)?

Conversely, there are other parents who are so entrenched in ensuring that their children have access to the best schools, most affluent neighborhoods, and top social strata, that they will move homes within what one might consider an excellent school to the very best school to ensure that their children have all the benefits available for academic next steps. These parents see their job as levitating their children both academically as well as socially to prepare them for the best colleges and the top peer influences.

While the parents' impressions are powerful and telling, it remains the student voices which offer the most truthful reflection on the world and how they see themselves within a larger societal context. The student interviews are from children who attend the most privileged schools, the lesser privileged but more diverse schools and the religious schools. While none of these school settings is academically inept, there are notable variances between the settings and the populace each serves. Margot, a high school student at Evergreen, the most diverse of the schools explains her concept of prejudice most clearly.

We talked about tracking...I think...there's a little bit of this idea that Black students wouldn't be able to, like, do as much...You know, prejudices. It's like even if you're not, like, a horrible, like, an outright racist person like me...we all have, you know, we all have these prejudices about people...And the teachers are pretty white (p. 200).

While most students have the impression that the whiter a school landscape becomes, the more affluent its resources, the students evidenced a loyalty to their given school and setting. The students within the most affluent setting appeared more open-minded about the existence of racial inequities than many of their parents; however, they appeared the least likely to recognize themselves as a part of the solution. A middle school student who attended the more diverse school system, Conor, detailed the following, "I talk to my friends about important stuff, including immigration policy, welfare, unequal schools, unfair teachers and racism...criticizing how their teachers negotiate conversations about social justice in his classroom" (p. 103).

There were students who attended the less favorable, more diverse school settings who were openly critical of those in the privileged setting. They saw themselves as change agents and appeared to view the more elite setting as mired in antiquity, unable to recognize the disparity between the races and social classes. This is evidenced by William, a high school student in the more diverse school who shares the following,

There's this statistic...that shows that the third grade is when you start seeing a literacy difference between white and Black kids...we just think that if we can – we can get some role models that are very, like, relatable to them and...will inspire them (p. 201).

Perhaps, not surprisingly, the more diverse school setting housed many of the more liberal-minded parents whose academic pedigree likely rivaled or exceeded the parents who selected to live and send their children to the public entity which, in all reality, was as restrictive as any private school setting due to its geographic proximity barriers. There are also voices within the narrative from students and parents whose attendance at the religious school portrayed the gloss of following a religious affiliation underpinned with a substantial aversion to

attendance within any given populace outside of their affiliation, presenting an attempt craft an illusion of their school choice as independent of poverty and diversity considerations.

Overall, *White Kids* is a powerful and pivotal presentation which, quite literally, gives the readers unique perspectives directly *out of the mouths of babes*, signifying a dramatic adjustment in the lens whereby school choices are typically determined and debated by parents and educators, independent of the impact that such foundational decisions have upon the lives of the students who attend these institutions. Intense in its brutally honest questions and often uncomfortable responses, this narrative is one for the ages. It demands that parents take a seat at the table and, at a minimum, genuinely accept the decisions they make for the reasons they are made rather than to imagine that society does not recognize the social barriers established by intentionally selecting or deselecting certain institutions. Furthermore, it challenges parents to acknowledge that their children are entitled to a voice and discussion in their educational outcomes. While crafted from an observer's point of view, the book does a beautiful job of removing the opacity of the school choice lens while generating valid and intentional discussion as to the outcomes society may well realize for generations to come.

References

Hagerman, M. (2018). *White Kids: Growing Up with Privilege in a Racially Divided America*. New York: New York University Press.