Long-standing debates about the sources of inequality shed light on the possibilities and limitations of sociology. At a presentation for teachers recently, I was asked what percentage of inequality in schools is the fault of students, parents, and teachers. Having just presented on my book, *Academic Profiling*, and the interlocking macro-meso-micro processes reproducing educational injustices, this question caught me off guard. Individualizing and quantifying who is at fault seems to avoid talking about structural factors, institutional transformation, and our roles in maintaining a system of inequality. However, I shouldn’t have been surprised. Individualizing narratives are common. The persistence of such discourses and inequalities affirms the importance of sociology in researching, naming, and disrupting the causes of unequal schooling. But sociology’s more transformative potential exists in our connections with movements and others outside of the discipline.

Debates surrounding the sources of educational inequality abound, and there is no shortage of scholarship contributing to our understanding. Decades ago, texts such as Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis’s *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) and Gilbert Gonzalez’s *Chicano Education in the Era of Segregation* (1990) detailed the role of the political economy in reproducing inequality in schools. Other foundational work, including Jeannie Oakes’ *Keeping Track* (1985) and Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities* (1991), documented the impacts of school practices and disparate resources on students’ livelihoods. Together, these early studies illustrated some of the structural and institutional factors reproducing disparities and the detrimental impacts for poor and working-class students and students of color. More recent scholarship such as Pedro Noguera’s *The Trouble with Black Boys* (2008) has emphasized the centrality of race, or, in the case of Nancy Lopez’s *Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys* (2003) and Julie Bettie’s *Women without Class* (2003), presented intersectional lenses to unpack the significance of race, class, and gender on educational opportunities and experiences.

Despite decades of research documenting the multiple factors fueling unequal schooling, power-evasive frameworks blaming individuals persist in popular discourse. Often, it is black and Latina/o students and their families who are blamed. In addition, in our current era of standardization and a narrow focus on achievement gaps, quantitative measurements are often privileged over the qualitative conditions that exist within our schools and society.

Two recent qualitative studies—*Schooling the Next Generation* and *Despite the Best Intentions*—tackle this legacy of disparity, add to ongoing debates, and offer glimpses of possibilities for the work we do. In the context of structural inequalities, these two books home in on the dynamics occurring in today’s schools with varied resources. They are ambitious in their scope and offer insightful lessons for qualitative researchers and those committed to educational justice. Studying distinct schools and communities, they center different voices and reach varied...
yet complementary conclusions about the sources of educational inequities. When read together, they enhance understanding of the sources and impacts of inequality between and within schools.

Schooling the Next Generation focuses on lower-income communities in ten public schools in East Vancouver, Canada. Determined to move “beyond positive rhetoric around multiculturalism and diversity to describe some of the specific associated challenges for urban schools,” Dan Zuberi presents a class-based argument to explore whether schools are meeting the needs of immigrant, refugee, and working-class families (p. 19). With growing wealth gaps and at a time when public schools are under attack, Zuberi offers a crucial analysis of resource disparities and the importance of public schools. His conceptualization of resources includes the financial and the social such as school supplies, counseling services, and programs for tutoring, mentoring, and overcoming trauma. This broad understanding of the roles played by our public schools illustrates Zuberi’s holistic definition of schooling and highlights the hardships many of today’s youth encounter.

However, Zuberi’s primarily class-based framework leaves gaps. First of all, the salience of racial discrimination and racialization in the lives of students and their families is minimized. This is the case even though Zuberi’s research focuses on “visible minorities.” Racism and discrimination are rarely mentioned. When they are, they are referred to as “unfortunate consequences” (p. 58). Secondly, although Zuberi celebrates the racial/ethnic diversity in schools, at times it appears that students, their families, and communities are blamed for being “challenging” because of what they are assumed to lack—money, the English language, and parenting skills. Such assumed deficiencies are couched as byproducts of class inequality, but little is said about the assets or what critical race theorists describe as the “community cultural wealth” that immigrant, working-poor, and first-generation students and students of color bring to school (see Yosso 2006). Similarly, with the exception of standardized testing, most school policies and practices go unquestioned. Instead, the focus is on “coping with challenging students” by adding more resources to schools. The implication is that the overall structure of schooling does not need changing—it is the schools that need more resources and the students who need access to compensatory education.

Working with a team of student researchers, most of Zuberi’s book is based on interviews with principals, teachers, parents, and community liaisons. While too often the voices of teachers and parents are excluded from discussions about schooling, in this case the centering of their perspectives and the way Zuberi sought their input may account for some of the book’s limitations. First, school principals were the ones who typically recommended parents for the study. This could have led to some skewing where only parents with positive relationships with the administration and favorable attitudes toward the schools were included. Second, while the backgrounds of the study participants were not clearly described, the overrepresentation of whites in the teaching profession may explain the missing discussion of race and racism.

Who we are influences what we experience, observe, and know; and in our era of color-blind discourse, it is not uncommon for whites to avoid talking about race, to not see white privilege, or to claim that racism no longer exists (for examples, see Frankenberg 1993; Sleeter 1993; Bonilla-Silva 2006). As in the United States, whites are overrepresented in the Canadian teaching force. In 2006, 93 percent of Canadian teachers and counselors were white. At 80 percent, Vancouver had a slightly smaller percentage of white educators, but it is still much higher than their overall population of 50 percent in the region (Ryan, Pollock, and Antonelli 2009). Thus, if white educators were the ones primarily interviewed, they may have been less likely to observe and thereby discuss the significance of societal and school-level racism on the educational experiences of the students of color in their schools.

Initially, Zuberi’s study was designed to be comparative and based on school rankings from standardized test scores. However, when test results varied yearly and school demographics shifted with growing gentrification, Zuberi realized the limitations of using test scores to ascertain school quality. Zuberi is to be commended for shifting the
direction of his research and for writing openly about this alteration. This willingness to change course based on what emerges in the field is a strength of qualitative research, and it serves as an example of the benefits of being flexible while researching. In addition, Zuberi’s recognition of the downfalls of what he calls “standardized testing regimes” is also significant for disrupting dominant assumptions and school practices in an era of extreme testing and assessment.

Overall, Schooling the Next Generation is unique for its focus on ten elementary schools. Few qualitative studies consider so many sites or center elementary schools. Thus, this book provides a much-needed exploration of the early school disparities that are often compounded as students make their way through the educational system. Likewise, the breadth of research conducted for this book is helpful for capturing similarities across schools and neighborhoods, and the range of school sites might also offset concerns by those critical of approaches that focus on one site. This study could potentially be used to make larger claims about the conditions within urban elementary schools in East Vancouver, Canada. However, the book’s inclusion of so many schools reduces some of the depth. Lacking background information and clear descriptions, distinct schools and communities sometimes blur together. As a result, this lack of specificity reduces the in-depth and nuanced understanding that is a hallmark of qualitative research.

Despite the Best Intentions picks up where Zuberi’s work ends. While Schooling the Next Generation provides a sweeping view of schooling for low-income students in urban areas, Despite the Best Intentions offers a detailed ethnographic look at the sources of inequality at one highly resourced suburban public school. During a multi-year period, Amanda Lewis and John Diamond, along with a team of student research assistants, conducted observations and over 170 interviews with students, parents, and staff members at a diverse, liberal, and middle-class Illinois high school.

Written in an accessible and engaging style, there is much to appreciate about Despite the Best Intentions. For scholars committed to producing work that is applied, this book emerged from a community-defined issue. The authors answered the call from a retiring assistant principal to help him understand the disparity in achievement between white and black students at the school. They began where the principal requested by interviewing some of the black students. A couple of years later, Lewis and Diamond commenced a full-fledged study to better examine students’ experiences. They focus on black, white, and Latina/o students across grade point average.

The study’s focus on suburban schooling is unique, and the relatively equal percentage of white and black students at a school with “abundant financial support,” well-trained educators, and quality facilities makes it an ideal site to unpack the academic disparities that exist even in well-resourced schools. It contests discourses that black students underachieve to avoid being charged with acting white, and it complicates class-based theories of educational inequality. Where Zuberi argues “money matters,” Lewis and Diamond instead make the case that “race matters on many levels” (p. 4).

Lewis and Diamond center their analysis on dynamics within schools and emphasize the salience of race. However, they do not ignore class. They consider the interactions of race and class in shaping income and wealth disparities, along with racialized components of economic and political hierarchies. In the context of racial interactions, ideologies, and structural inequalities, they home in on two types of school practices—curriculum tracking and discipline regimes. Their findings affirm earlier studies that illustrate how seemingly race-neutral school practices are steeped in racist origins and exclusionary outcomes that privilege whites and penalize blacks and Latinas/os (for examples, see Oakes 1985; Ferguson 2000; Rios 2011; Ochoa 2013). Using powerful testimonials, Lewis and Diamond capture how racial stereotypes are so entrenched that educators’ unequal treatment of students happens even when they have the best intentions of being fair.

Among the most innovative aspects of this book is the authors’ final discussion on the potentials of school reform. Ironically, although many of the educators at the school...
appeared distraught about racial inequalities in access and outcomes, change was elusive. Lewis and Diamond expose how liberal, white, and seemingly well-intentioned parents inhibited change. They didn’t block change through explicitly racist protests as in the past. Instead, their resistance was more subtle and cloaked in celebrations of diversity. On the one hand, white parents wanted their children to attend a diverse school; yet, they were reluctant to transform school practices such as curriculum tracking that have a history of privileging white upper- and middle-class students to the detriment of working-class students and students of color. Rather than calling for the end of exclusionary practices or greater access for all, such parents pushed for their own class and racial interests to make sure their children received the best. Drawing on the work of Charles Tilly and others, Lewis and Diamond label this dynamic “opportunity hoarding,” where whites aim to secure the most resources and opportunities for their children in ways that maintain inequality and white privilege. In essence, they want their children to be in a diverse school even if they are racially separated into unequal academic programs.

Upon preliminary reading, these two books appear to be a contemporary rendition of the classic debate in sociology about the relative significance of class versus race in the causes of educational inequality. However, these texts offer us much more. They speak to our approaches to research, the politics of positionality, and the field of sociology. They illustrate the value of research that is both broad and deep and of the importance of listening and allowing our work to unfold based on what we learn. Had Zuberi not altered what appeared to be a beautifully complex research design, he would have missed observing the limitations of today’s testing regime in schools. Had Lewis and Diamond stopped their study at the initial interviews they completed with 23 black students and 14 of their parents, a more nuanced and compelling analysis would have eluded them. Their studies, the books’ readers, and the schools that are their focus would have been shortchanged.

These studies also offer us cautionary reminders about how our social locations based on such factors as race, class, gender, sexuality, and immigration status—as well as how and with whom we complete research—influence knowledge production. The questions we ask, our perspectives, and what we know are influenced by our experiences and positions in society (Smith 1992; Delgado Bernal 1998; Collins 2001). This means that who is included in the profession is integral to the type of sociology that is produced. For example, when people of color and working-class academics are excluded from the canon, our courses, the professoriat in general, what is studied, the conclusions reached, and what we know are skewed.

Similarly, if we write about the unequal conditions in schools and do not include the voices of those most negatively impacted, we hinder what we know and reinforce inequality. Thus, at every stage of research, we must critically reflect on our positions, whose perspectives are centered, and how all of this shapes our results and the possibilities for change. This process of reflexivity can reduce biases and offer insight into how the inclusion and exclusion of certain perspectives impacts our research findings. This works toward the “strong objectivity” scholars such as Harding (1993) have long advocated.

Although still relatively unique in sociology, collaborative research and writing such as Lewis and Diamond’s is helpful for bringing multiple perspectives to bear on our work. This can be especially powerful when our collaborators are outside of the academy. Such collaborations have the potential to not only broaden understanding but also to alter the very institutions, discourses, and practices we study.

Sociology is at its best when it compels us to not only interrogate systems of inequality as these two books do but when it also forces us to examine our individual and collective roles in the reproduction of that inequality. Although there are significant exceptions, too often what is privileged is theory over application, writing for academics over
reaching wide audiences, and speaking to
the literature over addressing community-
defined issues. Perhaps when we do more
of the latter, our research, frameworks, and
analyses will more effectively help shift the
exclusionary discourses and practices within
schools.

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Stumbling towards Stockholm

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Lane Kenworthy believes that within the
next half-century the United States will
very likely become a “modern social democ-
rapy,” using government to advance a “good
society” of economic security, opportunity
(at least in the Amartya Sen sense of “capa-
bilities”), and rising living standards for
all. It will do this through generous and
employment-friendly social policies (insur-
ance, cash transfers, in-kind services, other
public goods) that also facilitate “freedom,
flexibility, and market dynamism” (p. 9).
The Nordic countries (particularly Denmark,
Sweden, and Norway) are Kenworthy’s mod-
el for this sort of society. He admires the

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