



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

---

Volume 42  
Issue 2 June

Article 11

---

2015

**Review of *Inequality in the Promised Land: Race, Resources, and Suburban Schooling*. R. L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy. Reviewed by Paul L. Tractenberg**

Paul Tractenberg  
*Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

---

**Recommended Citation**

Tractenberg, Paul (2015) "Review of *Inequality in the Promised Land: Race, Resources, and Suburban Schooling*. R. L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy. Reviewed by Paul L. Tractenberg," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol42/iss2/11>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

to be heard about the needs of Black communities served by the mainstream. A renewed emphasis on community organization was promoted, and there was tension in schools of social work associated with Black separatist strategies and dissent. Graduate education was an unsettling experience for those of us who were social casework students. Many of us remember vividly this struggle and the Black social work leaders involved. The author's research engenders many *deja vu* feelings about the liberation strategies Black social workers used as they separated from the mainstream approach and worked for a better understanding of the Black experience.

The late sixties and early seventies was a time of great social upheaval, and American social work had to give voice to competing civil rights issues and the competing needs of a diverse constituency. The role and status of women had to be reconsidered as a result of the Second Women's Liberation Movement. The emergence of new views about sexual orientation, with psychiatry's removal of homosexuality as a disease from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) in 1973, also had to be addressed. As a result of the dissent among Black social workers, mainstream social work organizations, education, and practice made efforts to become more inclusive and to give voice to the Black experience. However, the self-imposed segregation by Black social workers has persisted.

This study is a rich resource on both the development of Black professional organizations, as well as the influence of social movements in American society. Appendix Two contains a useful and informative chronology of founding dates for Black professional organizations. The author's research methodology uses both primary source data and oral histories.

*Wilma Peebles-Wilkins, Emerita, Boston University*

- R. L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy, *Inequality in the Promised Land: Race, Resources, and Suburban Schooling*. (2014). Stanford University Press. \$24.95 (hardcover), 232 pages.

From the outside, the suburban school district Lewis-McCoy calls Rolling Acres would seem to be the epitome of what progressive education reformers aspire to. It is racially,

ethnically and socioeconomically diverse. It has sufficient educational resources to provide all its students with a strong education. It has a teaching staff and administration that outwardly is enlightened and seems to say the right things. It has a community that speaks in support of its diversity. It is, as Lewis-McCoy's title indicates, the "Promised Land," or so it seems.

As Lewis-McCoy digs into Rolling Acres, however, it seems less and less a promised land. Despite all of its ostensible advantages, the district and its broader community reveal how much inequality exists under the surface. In ways big and small, significant and mundane, the picture that emerges from Lewis-McCoy's interviews and observations is of a world where inequality is still all too common, where Black and poor families still feel a lack of meaningful empowerment, where race and social class still count for too much.

Lewis-McCoy approaches his study in a way that differs from many studies of "second-generation" desegregation problems. He focuses on the dynamic of relationships between parents and school personnel, and among parents, more than on the numerical evidence that desegregation may exist at the district or school level, but racial, ethnic and class disparities persist where the educational rubber meets the road—in honors and AP classes, in disciplinary rates, in special education classifications. Lewis-McCoy touches upon such disparities, but his focus is elsewhere.

His fine-grained approach to a few schools and classrooms, and to a modest number of the students, parents and teachers who populate them, in a single suburban school district differs sharply from the approach some of us have taken over the years in an effort to promote educational equality. Many of us have focused on "resources," as Lewis-McCoy's title says he does, but we have defined that term in a much different way. We have challenged the huge disparities in school funding, an amalgam of state and local money, between relatively well-to-do suburban communities, like Rolling Acres, and desperately poor urban districts. For the most part, the suburban districts have been overwhelmingly populated by White and affluent families; in stark contrast, the urban districts have been

overwhelmingly populated by Black and brown and low-income families.

Reading *Inequality in the Promised Land* made me realize that our case was, as an advocacy matter, an easier one to pursue than Lewis-McCoy's. Ours involved glaring, easily documented disparities in treatment in the provision of fiscal resources. Of course, we had to contend with the argument that money doesn't matter when it comes to educational opportunity and achievement, but that argument seemed so contrary to the lived experience of those who attended public schools or had children in them that it lost traction with many courts. Lewis-McCoy's claim of inequality, at least in the context of Rolling Acres, is much more ephemeral, if equally real.

So, Lewis-McCoy does us a great service in tackling his difficult and complicated task. More to his credit, he succeeds, to a considerable extent, in making this more subtle and elusive form of inequality come alive for the reader.

Of course, there are weaknesses in his book. One he acknowledges is that most of his field work was done by 2005 or 2006 for a doctoral dissertation, eight or nine years before his book was published. Another is that he is better at describing the problem than at proposing concrete solutions for it. Indeed, in his brief concluding chapter, entitled "Hope in the Promised Land," every time he ventures a brief and generally-stated solution he proceeds to retreat into a longer reiteration of the underlying problem.

Lewis-McCoy sometimes contradicts himself on major assertions. For example, he takes to task those who have theorized that the problem he addresses is more one of class than race. By contrast, he asserts that it is more about race than class. Yet, as his discussion proceeds, at many points he acknowledges that class may be a larger explanation, either by itself or in combination with race.

In the big scheme of things, however, these are quibbles that retreat from the importance of what Lewis-McCoy has set out to do and largely accomplished. For that, we owe him thanks.

*Paul L. Tractenberg, School of Law, Rutgers University–Newark*