

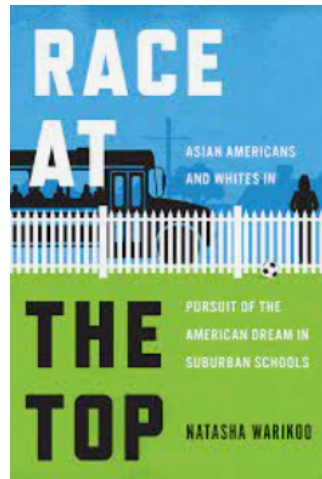
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JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

## Navigating the Intersection of Race, Culture, and Education: Lessons from *Race at the Top*

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Warikoo, N. (2022). *Race at the top: Asian Americans and Whites in pursuit of the American dream in suburban schools*. University of Chicago Press.

ISBN: 97810226636816

## Overview

Race and education are intrinsically inseparable. Throughout U.S. history, race and racism have shaped the epistemological conversation about educational issues and impacted the structure of the education system. Indeed, as a significant component of society, education plays a vital role in shaping and maintaining the social and racial hierarchies (Connell, 1993). Despite discussions about diversity and equity among educators and policymakers, education in the United States has become increasingly selective, disciplinary, and discriminatory over the years. On one hand, Asian and white students have historically been overrepresented in elite institutions (e.g., Poon et al., 2019). This overrepresentation has been the subject of much debate and controversy, with some arguing that it reflects the high levels of educational achievement exhibited by these groups, while others suggest that it is a manifestation of racism in the contemporary U.S. society. Yet, Asian and white families continue competing for access to elite institutions and facing tensions from their divergent parenting practices. Ultimately, for many Asian and white families who seek to hoard educational advantages for their children, they are caught in a race at the top of society.

The term “race at the top” was borrowed from Warikoo’s (2022) book *Race at the Top: Asian Americans and Whites in Pursuit of the American Dream in Suburban Schools*. In this book, Warikoo offers a thoughtful and nuanced scholarly take on the experiences of Asian American and white students in an affluent suburban East Coast school she calls “Woodcrest High.” Through extensive qualitative interviews, Warikoo provides an appealing case that demonstrates the privileges, pressures, and anxieties of Asian American and white upper- middle-class parents in advancing their children, even when they have already made it to

the top of the social hierarchy. Moreover, through an ethnographic approach, Warikoo uncovers the complex dynamics of race, class, and culture that shape the lives of these students in the zero-sum game of social mobility through education. For example, in chapter two, the author points out that immigrant Asian families and U.S.-born-white parents in Woodcrest tend to approach academic achievement and excellence differently. While white parents lean towards diverse pathways toward success, Asian American families are more inclined to push their children to meet the highest academic levels, including enrolling in supplementary classes, taking multiple Advanced Placement (AP) and honors classes and attending summer academic camps. In constructing this argument, Warikoo reminds readers of the importance of cultural repertoires and material resources in making these activities happen, bringing up an important discussion of how particular values around achievement travel with Asian immigrants.

In chapter three, Warikoo (2022) then turns to an exploration of how Woodcrest parents’ cultural repertoires shaped “what activities they encouraged, and how much time they thought their children should spend on those activities” (p. 75). Following the stories of six Asian American and white students and their parents in this chapter, Warikoo guides readers to get a deep, contextualized look into the process of how parents make decisions upon how much time and resources they invest in extracurricular activities. The waving of Asian American and white parents’ voices really come together as she demonstrates the role of race in impacting people’s pursuit of extracurricular excellence, especially intensive sports development. While most white parents interviewed in the study tend to ensure students make time for extracurriculars and prioritize athletic activities, Asian American parents had a much stronger focus on academics. In Warikoo’s words, “They put all

their eggs in the academic basket, perhaps in part because they felt it was their best shot at winning.” (p. 94).

Chapter four “Emotional Well-Being: Happiness and Status” directs readers’ attention to the emotional dimensions of parenting. In the chapter, Warikoo provides provocative and insightful analyses of how parents think about and attend to their children’s emotional well-being in ethnical inflicted ways. As class-privileged white parents become increasingly concerned about their children’s emotional well-being, they lobby for changes in town and school districts to reduce academic pressure, often in collaboration with schools and local leaders. The point made here opens up discussions about an important facet of the book. That is, within the upper-middle class, immigrant Asian and U.S.-born white parents employ different cultural repertoires to address concerns about their children’s emotional well-being, ultimately aligning with bolstering their own group status as they do so. Beyond advocating changes related to emotional wellbeing, white and upper-middle-class U.S.-born parents’ ability to enact changes further buttress their children’s educational advantages.

What chapters two to four bring to the discussion may seem to focus on the specific dimensions of how cultural repertoires shape Asian American and U.S.-born white parents’ parenting practices and produce complex conflicts in the educational context. In chapter five, Warikoo expands her discussion and takes a moral turn in examining participants’ perspectives influenced by their cultural repertoires and their own experiences. White parents enact moral boundaries that define good parenting and criticize styles of parenting that run into conflicts with them. With the construction of moral boundaries about academic expectations, white parents achieve to legitimize their judgments and disapproval of other parents’ summer plans and

academic-focused activities. The moral judgment of white parents is accompanied by their deep discontent with Asian parents’ “unreasonable academic expectations” (p. 129), contending such strategies made it unfair and more difficult for teenage white children to thrive academically. Hyperaware of these critiques, most Asian parents accept the critiques but distance themselves from these behaviors. In sum, the analysis in this chapter enables us to see what strategies and focus of interests are used by upper-middle-class Asian and white parents to achieve divergent social and educational goals and how they function in the fight to define the “right” way to parent.

At its core, it is the family, social class, and culture repertoires playing out in the current educational system that lie at the center of Warikoo’s interests and analytical focus. Part of the power and effectiveness of her work is an ability to see families, children, and their educational trajectories in relation to the racial divisions and social hierarchies and their effects back to the children’s educational trajectories. Despite Asian and white parents’ divergent educational perspectives in Woodcrest, what the parents failed to recognize were the privilege that shields their children from failure. Rather, the children who actually lose are those living beyond the boundaries of Woodcrest. By that I mean the historical and systematic inequity has led to disparities in opportunities for working-class Black, Brown, and Indigenous students to even get access to these resources. Indeed, in a variety of ways, Warikoo’s focus on the parenting strategies of the successful delineates a subtle analysis of unevenly distributed assets and the longstanding exclusion of Black, Brown, and Indigenous families from Woodcrest and likewise socioeconomically privileged spaces. The individuals, the institutions, the social relations in Woodcrest are organized in ways that perpetuate educational inequity, function to the benefits of the privileged groups, and fail to

recognize the systematic and root causes of the problems.

The book is a sophisticated example of national trends demonstrated at the local level. That is, wealthy parents across the nation are using their cultural repertoires and socioeconomic resources to benefit their children from the intense competitions to elite institutions. In recent years, there have been a number of high-profile lawsuits challenging affirmative action and race-conscious admission policies at elite institutions (Park et al., 2022). While many Asian American parents expressed concerns that affirmative action unfairly discriminates against hardworking Asian students, who are often high achieving on standardized tests; white parents tend to voice their concerns in a sense that admissions solely based on merit also penalize white students for their race. Such a framing reinforces the notion that admission to elite institutions is a zero-sum game, where one student's success comes at the expense of another's. However, what is being overlooked is the structural inequities that shape educational opportunities and outcomes under the context. Overall, the analysis of Asian and white parents' competition for power and privilege at the very top of society in Woodcrest reflects larger questions about equity and opportunity in the United States and highlights the ongoing challenges in ensuring that all students have access to a high-quality education.

While Warikoo's analysis shines light on the complex ways of how race, culture, and socioeconomic status play out in an affluent high-achieving suburban school, she did not address the experiences of those Asian and white students who come from low-income and working-class families. In particular, the focus on affluent and privileged Asian American families may perpetuate the model minority myth, undermine the challenges and structural disadvantages faced by low-income and

immigrant Asian Americans, and lead to further marginalization of the larger Asian American communities. Furthermore, there are occasional discriminatory statements by white parents in the interviews, it would have been a good opportunity to engage in deeper analysis and recognize the portrayal of racism in daily conversations. Analytically such perspectives provide insights into the lenses we employ to understand crucial sets of social relations that are created by and create racial dynamics. Additionally, while I appreciate the book's focus on race and achievement in suburban schools, I feel that it overlooks the experiences of Asian Americans in urban or low-income schools, where there may be different challenges and opportunities for success.

Nevertheless, *Race at the Top* is stunningly proactive and comprehensive, with a wide range of examples to illustrate the interplay between race, class, education, and social dynamics. To a great extent, the book also offers an intelligent and sensitive reflectivity. As an Asian transnational doctoral student, myself, I was educated in and indeed benefit from an educational system of meritocracy (Qiu et al., 2023). Such reflectivity makes me realize that I am also the perpetuator of the racial tensions and should be responsible for bringing attention to the continuing racial inequity in this country. Additionally, the book's focus on the complexities of race and achievement, rather than reducing them to a simple dichotomy, has deepened my understanding of the structural and cultural factors that contribute to academic success. By highlighting the ways in which race, class, and culture intersect to shape educational outcomes, the book has prompted me to question my own assumptions about success and privilege in education. Overall, the book has challenged me as a reader to think critically about the intersections of race and education and has broadened my perspective on these important issues. As I look back on the book

again now, some questions strike me. What can we learn from the experiences of Asian American and white students in Woodcrest that can inform our efforts to create a more just and equitable educational system for all students? How can we work towards dismantling the social and racial hierarchies that exist within our educational system and society more broadly? What can we do to help promote greater understanding between different racial and ethnic groups and eventually ensure that students from all backgrounds have equal access to high-quality educational opportunities? These questions need to be given much greater attention as we navigate the racial tensions in different aspects of society, and I hope the book is a wake-up call for you, too.

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