

Spring 2007

Segregated Schools: Educational Apartheid in Post-Civil Rights America and Unfinished Business: Closing the Racial Achievement Gap in Our Schools

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Recommended Citation

Burrell, Kristopher. "Segregated Schools: Educational Apartheid in Post-Civil Rights America and Unfinished Business: Closing the Racial Achievement Gap in Our Schools." *Radical Teacher Magazine*, 77 (Spring 2007): 36-38.

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**SEGREGATED SCHOOLS:
EDUCATIONAL APARTHEID IN
POST-CIVIL RIGHTS AMERICA**

by Paul Street (Routledge, 2005)

**UNFINISHED BUSINESS:
CLOSING THE RACIAL
ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN OUR
SCHOOLS**

by Pedro Noguera and Jean Yonemura
Wing, eds. (Jossey-Bass, 2006)

**BY KRISTOPHER
BURRELL**

Segregated Schools by Paul Street and *Unfinished Business* by Pedro Noguera and Jean Yonemura both weigh in on the legacy of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that outlawed racial segregation in public schools. Both books ask, "Can schools be agents of societal change?" and illustrate that substantial work still needs to be done in order to fulfill the letter and spirit of *Brown*. The approaches of the two works, however, reflect the authors' different central premises.

Segregated Schools argues that we are witnessing the resegregation and permanent inferiorization of urban, poor, predominantly nonwhite public schools. According to Street, this is the result of several factors. Among them is the reliance on tax revenues to fund public education, which systematizes the funding disparities between wealthier suburban and predominantly white districts, and poorer inner city and predominantly black and Latino districts. Another factor is the tracking of students of color into remedial and other basic skills courses that hinder their chances of going to college. A third is the racist perception of some teachers, school administrators, and politicians that students of color are not as educable as whites, which has led to a "militarist obsession with 'security'" in many poor urban nonwhite schools (76-77). And a fourth factor is the No Child Left Behind Act's "real long-term agen-

da" (168) to privatize public education through school vouchers and charter schools. This has compelled public schools to gear their curricula towards preparing students to take standardized tests; as a result, developing critical thinking skills and actively engaging students in their own education is virtually ignored.

For Street, any plan to substantially reform public education must be broader than focusing on schools in isolation from the larger problems facing poor urban communities of color. In agreement with other education scholars including Richard Rothstein, Jean Anyon, and Christopher Jencks, Street asserts that any viable plan to remedy educational inequities necessarily has to deal with the "savage" economic and political inequalities in American society.

Street spends considerable time putting the *Brown* decision in historical context as well as discussing the court decisions since 1980 that have tended to undermine *Brown's* mandate. As American political culture has continued to shift rightward, school districts have become much less likely to voluntarily—or by court order—devise and implement desegregation plans. The result has been a significant increase in the percentage of grossly underfunded racially homogeneous schools, filled with less-qualified teachers who expect little from their pupils. The students in such schools, consequently, produce less.

Street paints a disturbing picture of the contemporary state of public education, but many of his observations will not sound "new" to anyone familiar with Kenneth Clark's analysis of Harlem's schools in his 1964 book, *Dark Ghetto*. Referencing the similarities between Clark's forty year-old observations and the contemporary state of public education—the grind-

ing poverty of urban ghettos, the dangers of racially segregated education, and the inferior educational quality in predominantly nonwhite schools—would have brought home more forcefully Street's main arguments about the "savage" systemic inequities in American schools. Activists have been bringing these educational and social inequalities to light for decades. Street could have more effectively demonstrated how far we are as a nation from providing equal educational opportunities for all children.

Whereas *Segregated Schools* focuses on the unequal funding patterns between school districts and the racial segregation between schools and communities, in *Unfinished Business* Noguera and Wing emphasize the segregation within one particular school that results in dissimilar educational out-



comes for students based on differences in race, class, language, and sexual orientation. The editors begin with the premises that "public education is vital for a healthy democracy. . . [and] that schools can play a decisive role in making our nation less divided and fractured on the basis of race, class, culture, gender, and language" (xvi). The authors work to make broad suggestions about the processes and prospects for school reforms that would close the

racial achievement gap and ensure quality education for all children.

Unfinished Business is the product of a six-year research project at Berkeley High School (BHS) in Berkeley, California. BHS teachers, students, and parents, along with University of California professors and graduate students investigated and proposed solutions to close the racial achievement gap there. The researchers conducted their study at BHS for a variety of reasons. One reason was that in 1994 the *New York Times* declared Berkeley High the most integrated high school in the country. Also, the city of Berkeley has a history and reputation for being progressive. With that pedigree, what would it say about the pace or prognosis for racial integration and equitable education in American schools if the racial achievement gap that plagues school districts nationwide proved just as intractable to remedy in Berkeley?

The researchers compiled evidence to document that there was indeed a racial achievement gap at BHS in

While the students offered their opinions as to how to improve Berkeley High, it became obvious that BHS and district administrators were not prepared to seriously consider student input.

which black and Latino students, and those from socioeconomically lower-class families, suffered academically when compared to most middle- and upper-class white and Asian students. But in contrast to Street, who emphasizes factors external to educational institutions, the members of the BHS Diversity Project were concerned with critically examining the structures within the school in order to demonstrate the ways they contributed to,

and perpetuated the racial achievement gap at the school. They examined several institutional structures that have been taken for granted as racially, economically, culturally, or gender-neutral and demonstrated how they, in fact, contributed to the creation and maintenance of virtually two separate high schools. Among the "school conditions that contribute to disparities in achievement," according to the authors, are "school size, the student-to-counselor ratio, procedures that are used to track students into higher- and lower-level courses, and processes used to provide academic support to students who are struggling" (31). As a result of the internal segregation that these conditions create, BHS prepares the majority of its middle and upper-class and white students to get into the most prestigious colleges in the country, while most lower-class and black and Latino students endure feelings of apathy, low academic achievement, and a significantly reduced opportunity to get into any but community colleges—if they graduate at all.

Over the course of its six year existence, the BHS Diversity Project produced some important successes including the formation and sustenance of two independent parent groups to advocate for black and Latino students. And participating in the Diversity Project was clearly a transformative experience for those involved. The editors admit, however, that they did not lessen the racial achievement gap at BHS because of opposition to some of the Project's proposals from middle- and upper-class parents, teachers, and school administrators—including ensuring that veteran teachers are assigned to teach students who are most in need; aligning graduation requirements with the California university system requirements so that more graduates would qualify for college admission (291); reducing the high turnover rates among principals and teachers; and imposing upon teachers some of the policy changes that might be most controversial to them.

The most powerful section of *Unfinished Business* was the final chapter, which includes former-student-participant reflections. The students elo-

quently and keenly articulate the injustices they experienced and witnessed while at BHS. They also demonstrate the importance of their participation in the Diversity Project, as well as that of student involvement in any genuine, substantial reform initiative. While the students offered their opinions as to how to improve Berkeley High, it became obvious that BHS and district administrators were not prepared to seriously consider student input. This was to the detriment of efforts to change the academic and social culture at Berkeley High.

This is one of the most important lessons of *Unfinished Business*: students can—and need to—be engaged in processes of school reform. The editors also make clear that educational equity is not only confined to class composition and teaching practices (although these are very important). Equity also needs to extend to course selection, department location, the dissemination of college preparatory information, and the mindsets of teachers, administrators, and students.

Both *Segregated Schools* and *Unfinished Business* are important works that will inspire lively debate about the legacy of *Brown*, the causes of the enduring racial achievement gap in public education, and how to eliminate it. These debates absolutely need to include students. Teaching *Segregated Schools* could be an effective way of doing this. The book provides ample data to dramatize the staggering disparity in the quality of education provided to different groups of children. Many students will recognize the current state of their schools in Street's descriptions and be given the tools to see their situation in a broader societal perspective. Street's language is also accessible to high school and college students and offers many issues about which students could debate in class. *Unfinished Business* will hopefully move teachers and administrators to take hard looks at their school infrastructures in order to ensure that they are not unconsciously perpetuating similar educational inequities.

Even though these books begin with different premises, they share important common ground: that the inequities in public education that neg-

actively and disproportionately affect students of color and poor students need to be eradicated, and being successful in doing so is critical for creating the types of schools and type of society most Americans desire.

WORDS TO OUR NOW: IMAGINATION AND DISSENT

by Thomas Glave (University of Minnesota Press, 2005)

BY NANCY C. DEJOY

“What could these preposterous imaginings possibly have to do with our curriculum, and how the hell could we actually be speaking about such unheard-of things” (153)? Although this question appears overtly only in one essay in Thomas Glave’s extraordinary collection *Words to Our Now: Imagination and Dissent*, each essay gives us new ways to think about the importance of silenced issues in our educational curricula. In that particular essay, “Regarding a Black Male Monica Lewinsky, Anal Penetration, and Bill Clinton’s Sacred White Anus,” the “unheard of thing” is apparent: sexual relations between two men, one of whom is president of the United States, the other a black gay male. But all of Glave’s essays invite readers to identify and question the grounds upon which they create systems of oppression and punishment (e.g., silence, ignorance, exclusion), especially those based upon histories of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. Invoking and stretching the essay form at its best, *Words to Our Now* not only invites us to look honestly at the ways in which our beliefs operate in the world but also to imagine a less violent, more humane, and compassionate way of believing that the world could be a better place. If you are looking for ways to open these conversations with colleagues and students without setting aside discussions about the beauty of language and the potential of style, Thomas Glave’s essays are for you.

The seventeen essays in the book explore race, sexuality, gender, and national identity by focusing on con-

crete realities like the murder of nineteen-year-old Steen Fenrich (killed and dismembered by his stepfather because he was gay); the homophobic violence present in Jamaica and the United States; the 2004 murder of Brian Williamson, Jamaica’s LGBT rights activist; Abu Ghraib; the “difficulties” caused when one cannot discuss one’s life honestly with one’s friends; and the imperialism of recent U.S. interventions in Iraq. While there have been many fine collections of essays that deal with issues of discrimination based upon race, sexuality, gender, and nationality, Glave’s collection is set apart by a constant and gentle insistence that we look at these in relation to personal, familial, institutional, historical, national and international events and practices.

This is not an easy thing to do, nor is it an easy thing to invite students to do, especially when they expect education to present them only with information they assume they should identify with. Glave knows how to use research not only to challenge our habits of identification, however, but also to illustrate alternative ways to build relationships with the harsh realities he confronts. But what really distinguishes Glave’s work is that the themes of memory, humanity, and history are woven throughout with a boldness of imagination that is as compassionate to readers as it is to the subject matter. Whether he is exploring early childhood memories to contextualize his place as a gay black male, rereading *Thereafter Johnnie*, exploring the terrain of dual citizenship, or exposing the difficult questions that confront humanity in times too often driven by hate and fear, Glave is aware of the ways that we must all accept our own and one another’s failures as we struggle to make the world a better place. Imagination, which often takes the form of asking questions (how to feel for example, about U.S. terrorism; how to live with, for example, the reality of violence and the acceptance of violence toward specific populations in the U.S. and abroad), opens up a space for exploring the ways in which we might face these difficult realities without being defeated by them. Most importantly, perhaps, Glave shows us

how imagining revisions dissent not as an end, or goal, but as the ground upon which the possibilities of compassions emerge and grow.

At a time when many educators are struggling to maintain a space for important discussions about race, class, gender, and sexuality within increasingly conservative sets of standardized expectations, Thomas Glave reminds us that imagination, dissent, and the courage to combine the two can give us cause for real hope. While not every essay may be appropriate in every context or for every group of students, there is at least one that can be used to illustrate the importance of rigorous questioning, imaginative response, honest research, genuine humanity, and courage as central to essay writing in various educational settings. If nothing else, *Words to Our Now* should make us all rethink the terms upon which we select readings and teach essay writing.

WHY IS CORPORATE AMERICA BASHING OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

by Kathy Emery and Susan Ohanian
(Heinemann, 2004)

BY KAREN J. HALL

PEDAGOGY OF THE GLOBALIZED

Kathy Emery and Susan Ohanian’s *Why is Corporate America Bashing Our Public Schools?* (*Bashing*) should be read by every U.S. citizen—and given the global reach of the Business Roundtable, its main subject of discussion, it should be read by every citizen everywhere. Granted, that is a trite way to begin a review, but in a historical moment when Laura Bush and the U.S. State Department are encouraging all citizens to read *The Kite Runner*, it makes sense to take a detailed look at the agenda and agenda setters for this country’s education system. While both Hosseini’s novel and the No Child Left Behind program claim to offer hope and redemption, Emery and Ohanian show that when education serves the interests of the empowered.