

No Easy Answers

Untangling race and education

[Unabridged Web Version]

Race and Education, 1954–2007

By Raymond Wolters

University of Missouri Press, 2008, \$44.95; 313 pages.

Steady Gains and Stalled Progress: Inequality and the Black-White Test Score Gap

By Katherine Magnuson and Jane Waldfogel (editors)

Russell Sage Foundation, 2008, \$42.50; 355 pages.

As reviewed by Gareth Davies

Each of these books attempts to characterize the educational impact of the civil rights movement. Wolters is a historian at the University of Delaware who has written widely on 20th-century race relations in the United States. Magnuson and Waldfogel, meanwhile, are professors of social work, at Wisconsin and Columbia, respectively, and their 16 cocontributors to *Steady Gains and Stalled Progress* are all social scientists as well: economists, sociologists, statisticians, students of public policy and business. That disciplinary divide results in some marked differences in approach. Wolters constructs a largely chronological history of the first half century of the *Brown* decision, and the case studies of desegregation-in-action that he uses to illustrate his thesis are drawn from contemporary news coverage and subsequent historical, legal, and political science scholarship. How, he asks, did judges come to embrace highly ambitious goals of school integration, having initially believed that the Constitution forbade official discrimination but did not require actual mixing of the races? What have been the

consequences of that shift for American race relations? And what have been the consequences for schools, and for learning outcomes?

Contributors to the Magnuson and Waldfogel collection are interested only in the third of those questions, with specific reference to the test-score gap between African American and white children. Why did this gap narrow sharply during the 1970s and 1980s but then stay stubbornly constant, or even widen? And—the \$64 million question—how might it finally be eliminated? Seeking to isolate the multiple factors that combine to determine educational outcomes, the social scientists mine the mother lode of education research in the United States: the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Every four years, NAEP standardized tests assess the performance of 4th-, 8th-, and 12th-grade children in reading and math: for reading, the data go back to 1971, for math to 1978, and the most recent results come from 2004. The raw material is enormously rich, allowing scholars with high-level mathematical and computer skills to probe vastly important questions about the dynamics of learning and the determinants of inequality. Between 1971 and 1988, according to NAEP data, the reading gap between white and black 12th graders declined from 52 points to 20 (the gap also diminished for 4th and 8th graders, albeit not quite so sharply). By 2004, though, it had widened again, to 29 points, meaning that African American 12th graders were reading at about the same level as white 8th graders. The curve for math is flatter, but follows the same basic trajectory.

In very different ways, both of these books make for uncomfortable reading. The essays in *Steady Gains and Stalled Progress* frequently bring to mind the 1966 Coleman Report. James S. Coleman, a distinguished mathematical sociologist at Johns Hopkins University, was asked in 1964 to investigate the impact of educational discrimination on learning outcomes. A passionate believer in racial equality (he and his wife had been arrested for participating in civil rights protests in Baltimore), Coleman was convinced that he would find the impact to be dramatic. He told one reporter that “the study will show the difference in the quality of schools that the average Negro child and the average white child are exposed to. You know yourself that the difference is going to be striking. And even though everybody knows there

is a lot of difference between suburban and inner-city schools, once the statistics are there in black and white, they will have a lot more impact.”¹

When Coleman and his colleagues set their then state-of-the-art computers to work, however, they were surprised to discover that none of the most obvious aspects of educational inequality (class size, teacher experience and pay, age of buildings, library and laboratory facilities) seemed to explain the black-white gap in schooling outcomes.² Four decades on, one senses the determination of Magnuson, Waldfogel, and their colleagues to avoid a similar finding and to generate findings that will assist policymakers in promoting equality of educational opportunity. Time and again, however, they conclude that the particular factor that they have been invited to examine can only be shown to have a relatively small impact, if that. During the course of the volume, NAEP and Current Population Survey data are used to probe a broad range of variables, including teacher qualifications, hours spent watching television, levels of socioeconomic inequality, degrees of racial segregation, particular school-reform policies, family structure, and race-specific cultural attitudes. In almost every case, these scrupulous, expert, and judicious researchers are forced to conclude that the evidence is mixed or unclear.

Just occasionally they are less equivocal, as when they observe that aggressive integration policies helped black children during the 1970s, that mounting socioeconomic inequality after the late eighties contributed to the subsequent widening in the test-score gap, and that inequality in the preschool environment plays an important role in determining late educational outcomes. When encountering these passages in *Steady Gains and Stalled Progress*, one seems to grasp for them, welcoming the momentary clarity of the findings, and the possibility that they might be usable by policymakers. Yet the sense of relief does not last, for these islands of clarity are invariably surrounded by a broad sea of circumspection and equivocation that leave one adrift, wondering just how reliable they and similar assertions are, and

¹ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Coping: Essays on the Practice of Government* (New York: Random House, 1973), 168.

² “School to school variations in achievement from whatever source (community differences, variations in the average home background of the student body, or variations in school factors) are much smaller than individual variations within the school, at all grade levels, for all racial and ethnic groups. This means that most of the variation in achievement could not possibly be accounted for by school differences, since most of it lies within the school.” Coleman et al., “Equality of Educational Opportunity” (1966), cit. Moynihan, *ibid.*, 171.

just how policymakers might go about using this book to improve educational outcomes for minority children. More broadly, precisely because this is so conspicuously *fine* a book, in terms of its authors' methodological rigor and scholarly apparatus, one wonders whether educational research is intrinsically doomed to provide the classic illustration of Rossi's Law: "the expected value for any measured effect of a social program is zero."³ Alternatively, it may be that the various contributors to *Steady Gains and Stalled Progress* could have derived more usable conclusions from their statistical evidence had they made a greater effort to relate it to concrete political realities, and to make their findings comprehensible to a general audience, as Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips did so well in the introductory essay to their classic 1998 collection, *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. Comparing the two books (three authors contributed to each), contributors to the earlier volume are circumspect, too, but they generally seem to have been less imprisoned by their quantitative data, taking care to offer well-rounded accounts of the actual circumstances in which African American schoolchildren are educated and raised, and of the *politics* of education policymaking.⁴ In so doing, they bring their statistics alive and reach out to a broader audience. By contrast, the contributors to *Steady Gains and Stalled Progress* occasionally seem to be talking only to one another.

Wolters's book is discomfiting for a very different reason: he does not believe that racial integration is a good thing, thinking that efforts to integrate schools have had deleterious consequences for both blacks and whites, and for the American political system. Whereas an overwhelming consensus of both historians and social scientists today would begin from the assumption that race is an artificial, social construct, and that differences in educational attainment between "whites" and "blacks" reflect environmental differences, Wolters proposes that race is fundamental: he considers it likely that there are hereditary differences in intelligence between blacks and whites, that human beings are intrinsically and

³ Peter Rossi, "Issues in the Evaluation of Human Services Delivery," *Evaluation Review*, 1978, vol. 2, no. 4, 574.

⁴ Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, eds., *The Black-White Test Score Gap* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1998).

elementally race conscious and race proud, and that social engineering efforts to force the races together are doomed to have profoundly unhappy consequences.⁵

For all this, Wolters does not hanker after Jim Crow, and is by no means a simple apologist for white supremacist thinking: he considers legally enforced segregation to have been wrong, and—shades of Abraham Lincoln here?—he believes that blacks as individuals deserve an equal opportunity to go so far as their talents will carry them, even if the barriers to their success as a group are formidable. And in order to distance himself from the obvious charge of racism that such views are bound to provoke, he argues that many of his views about race mixing were common among African American intellectuals in the past, not least W. E. B. Du Bois (whose career and ideas were the subject of his previous book). In a fascinating passage, Wolters quotes Du Bois as having remarked in 1935 that black students in the North were often taught in integrated schools, but were “not educated” because prejudiced white teachers regarded them with scorn. “[T]he treatment of Negro children in [desegregated] schools,” he went on, “is such that they ought to demand a thorough-going revolution in the official attitude toward Negro students, or absolute separation in educational facilities.” There should “never be an opposition to segregation pure and simple,” he remarked on another occasion, “unless that segregation...involve[s] discrimination.”⁶

That said, Wolters does not spend *very* much time covering his back like this: for the most part, he presents his argument in astonishingly bald and provocative terms. Having provided a comparatively restrained and unexceptionable account of the circumstances surrounding the *Brown* ruling (like many scholars today, he considers that it had the right outcome, but was a sloppy piece of legal reasoning), he gives extended treatment to an obscure 1963 case in the lower federal courts called *Stell v. Savannah-County Chatham Board of Education*. It interests him because, whereas in the *Brown* case it was the NAACP that used problematic social science evidence in order to attack segregation, here it was

⁵ He explains his position on racial difference in the opening section of the book: “The evidence on this subject is not conclusive....My personal opinion is similar to that of [the University of Chicago physiologist] Dwight Ingle....In 1963 Ingle wrote, ‘The concept that White and Negro races are approximately equally endowed with intelligence remains a plausible hypothesis for which there is faulty evidence. The concept that the average Negro is significantly less intelligent than the average White is also a plausible hypothesis.’ Ingle went on to say that he considered the evidence of the second hypothesis ‘somewhat stronger.’” Wolters, *Race and Education*, x.

⁶ Wolters, *Race and Education*, 37–39.

segregationist lawyers who relied on such evidence to argue that blacks were intrinsically less intelligent than whites, and would necessarily be harmed by integration. These same lawyers went on to argue that whites too would suffer, not just because they would be sharing the classroom with a less intelligent group, but because of the intrinsic tendency of blacks to engage in antisocial behavior. While Wolters does not explicitly applaud these arguments at this point, neither does he criticize them. Instead, he lets the segregationists speak for themselves. By contrast, in the preceding section on *Brown* he delights in exposing the flawed sociological logic upon which the NAACP relied.

If this asymmetry is disturbing, the section on *Stell* is nevertheless fascinating and new, inasmuch as it provides a rare and rich glimpse into the intellectual worldview and racial prejudices of the midcentury segregationist. For the most part, scholars of 20th-century civil rights are reluctant to take the segregationist mindset seriously, presumably fearing that to do so is to give unwarranted attention to obnoxious views. (By contrast, the mindset of the safely distant, antebellum plantation South has received exhaustive and serious treatment, including from left-wing scholars such as the great Eugene Genovese.) Yet if one is to gauge the magnitude of the civil rights movement's achievement in disestablishing Jim Crow, it is important to take Southern massive resistance seriously.

This, however, is not why Wolters brings *Stell* to the fore. Rather, subsequent chapters on the implementation of *Brown* make it clear that he does so because he thinks that the segregationists were on to something. Sensibly, Wolters decides to follow the desegregation/integration story by focusing on the five jurisdictions that were directly at issue in *Brown* and its companion case, *Bolling v. Sharpe*: Topeka, Kansas; the District of Columbia; Wilmington, Delaware; Prince Edward County, Virginia; and Clarendon County, South Carolina. Because these locales are so very different from one another, they give one a potentially rich opportunity to probe the determinants of success or failure. What difference did it make whether desegregation was being attempted in a depressed agricultural region with a black majority, a northern industrial city with a medium-sized black population, or a plains community with comparatively few African Americans? Wolters is struck more by similarities than differences. Wherever integration was attempted, the result was disastrous to the education system, to both races, and to race

relations. At times, he comes close to reversing the traditional good guys/bad guys approach that dominates the historiography of civil rights: polite, white children in Topeka and Wilmington are presented as being assailed by black hoodlums from the ghetto, forced together by politically correct school administrators and left-liberal activist judges. Along the way, teachers cease to enforce discipline, self-segregation of the races increases, educational standards decline, racist attitudes harden, and resegregation gathers force, as whites who can afford to flee just as far as they have to in order to find orderly, high-quality schools.

As in the section on *Stell*, there is all manner of interesting raw material here, as well as in later chapters treating efforts to overcome de facto segregation in places like Charlotte, Dayton, Detroit, Portland, Oregon, and Syracuse. In the best passages, Wolters provides a vivid, unsettling account of how and why whites often fled big-city school systems as integration gained force, building on his previous exploration of these themes in *The Burden of Brown* (1985). Yet this is surely not the whole picture. To return to Magnuson and Waldfogel, if desegregation was such an educational failure, why did the test-score gap diminish so markedly during the 1970s and early 1980s? Whether or not desegregation contributed to that outcome (the evidence is inconclusive), it does not seem to have done any harm. Thinking more broadly, if desegregation and integration were really such a disaster in terms of American race relations, how is one to explain the plethora of statistical and anecdotal evidence suggesting a dramatic liberalization in racial attitudes during the past four decades? Does it really make sense to construct a narrative of American relations during that period that is driven entirely by decline and dashed hopes?

Wolters rightly notes in the introduction to *Race and Education* that the historical profession, like American academe generally, is overwhelmingly liberal in its political sympathies. Doubtless that is particularly true of scholars who have devoted their careers to the study of American race relations and the struggle for minority rights. In such a milieu, academic life for a conservative, contrarian scholar such as Raymond Wolters must often have been hard, for all the satisfactions that he has doubtless derived from bucking the conventional wisdom. Perhaps that helps to explain the racial insensitivity that is such a

marked feature of *Race and Education*. Having been immersed for half a century in an intellectual world dominated by scholars who celebrate the moral grandeur of the African American freedom struggle and excoriate its enemies, Wolters may feel that the time has come to present the other side of the case. Whatever the explanation, his failure to show any sympathy at all for the cause of racial equality sharply differentiates his work from that of other conservative scholars, such as Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom, or from other historians who have emphasized the problematic legacy of *Brown*, such as James T. Patterson.⁷ It is that racial insensitivity—far more than its pessimistic thesis—that makes this a deeply uncomfortable book to read.

As for his pessimism, perhaps that too is a product of a sense of deep intellectual alienation. True, Wolters ends on a somewhat positive note (from his point of view), with the Roberts Court returning in 2007 to the “original” construction of the *Brown* decision in its Seattle and Louisville schools decisions. But the overall authorial tone is bitter and indignant, to such an extent that he seems unable to assimilate *any* evidence that might suggest a more positive assessment, while appearing to grasp at whatever anecdotal evidence or source best substantiates his tale of woe. Whereas contributors to *Steady Gains and Stalled Progress* extrapolate agonizingly tentative findings from an impeccably rigorous reading of the available statistical evidence, Wolters derives breathtakingly sweeping conclusions from a strikingly limited empirical foundation. In each case, the approach is likely to prevent the volume from having a very substantial scholarly impact.

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⁷ Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003); James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).