“Acting White”

Roland Fryer’s research reported in the last issue of Education Next (“Acting White,” research, Winter 2006) uses a large nationally representative data set and innovative statistical methods to show convincingly that black students in racially integrated public schools have fewer friends if they earn A’s than if they earn B’s. He defines this finding as evidence of “acting white.” The findings are important, but they may or may not be due to acting white (or the social dynamics surrounding the accusation) as people usually define it. Last spring (after debating Fryer about his definition), I included the following question on a survey to which several thousand students across several school districts responded: “At this school, people like me get accused of acting white.” Preliminary analysis shows patterns that are fascinating. It appears that accusations of acting white really are a problem and could be part of the explanation for Fryer’s findings concerning popularity, but the patterns are more nuanced than people might expect.

Ronald F. Ferguson
Senior Research Associate
Harvard University

The notion that black students engage in academic self-sabotage because of fear that they will be subjected to taunts from their same-race peers, as Roland Fryer writes, is to attribute racial inequality to black dysfunctionality. This is no different than the perspective William Ryan years ago astutely labeled “blaming the victim.” Its propagation absolves the researcher and the policymaker from looking at deep-seated structural and institutional practices that perpetuate racial disparities.

Fryer’s study treads gingerly on the victim-blaming field. Constructively, his work indicates that to the extent that a burden of acting white exists, it is not universal. He finds no evidence of such a phenomenon, for instance, for black students in predominantly black high schools. This is especially intriguing, since, in the original construction of the claim, Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu professed to have found the phenomenon of racialized harassment for black high achievers in an all-black high school in Washington, D.C. However, if one looks carefully at their 1986 Urban Review paper, none of the student narratives they report makes any reference to a fear of being accused of being a race traitor. Their respondents do express an aversion to being called a “brainiac,” but this is absolutely different from white high achievers not wanting to be called “nerds” or “geeks.”

If popularity measures are indicators of the presence of a burden of acting white, then Fryer’s finding is no surprise to those of us who have studied the subject. What is missing from his study, however, is information about the racial composition of the most-advanced classes offered by the schools in the Adolescent Health data. Research that colleagues and I have conducted indicates that when a burden of acting white develops, it occurs in a specific context, a school that is desegregated at the facility level, but has a segregated curriculum due to racialized tracking. The one or two black students who find their ways into Advanced Placement or Honors classes may well be subjected to racialized harassment from black peers who are outside of those classes—classes that appear to be the property of white students. School practices with respect to race and class assignment produce the burden of acting white, not attitudes that black students hold regardless of the type of school they attend.

What becomes critical is to understand the processes that lead to a segregated curriculum or the exclusion of black students from AP and Honors classes. Those processes find their origins in the elementary-school years with the extreme underidentification of black students for gifted and talented programs. Those are the processes generating schooling inequality that merit far more attention than the alleged burden of acting white.

William Darby Jr.
Professor of Economics
University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill

Saving High School

The American High School: Can It Be Saved?” Despite the alarmist title and even more clever—but-frightening illustrations in this forum (Winter 2006), the answer that your authors [Jeffrey Mirel, Jay Greene, and Chester Finn Jr.] give seems to be “yes,” or at least, “maybe.”

We agree that big changes are needed. But the problems in American education are so varied and so complex—our nation is so varied and so complex—that we cannot find a single persuasive, agreed-upon analysis of the problem. So we rush into “solutions,” and when they don’t “work” for every one of every child’s problems, we declare the solution a failure.

American education has always had two passions: for excellence and for equity. Excellence in the Committee of Ten era meant singular coherence,
so that the many new high schools being provided would know what to teach, so that their graduates would be admitted to college. Today, excellence is often described as college admission, especially to selective colleges, but is also likely to be described as being “competitive with the world’s standards,” chiefly as seen in test scores. That’s where equity comes in. If all we had to do as a nation was to fill up selective colleges with bright, skillful students, a number of us might consider our “problem” solved, especially if we were the parents of those students. However, we have many more students than that, and they have to create decent adult lives for themselves in an economy that will make new demands on its workers. Moreover, at a time when democracy itself is embattled by those who are bent on fooling us, we need to take our, and their, roles as citizens seriously.

Equity is unlikely to arise from the aping of the Committee of Ten or even its watering down. Instead, it is the careful, thoughtful rethinking of exactly what a young adult needs to know, not only to go to college, but to live a worthy life: which skills, taken to which level, and which content, taken to which depth. Instead of the sense that each child should be stacked up against all others in a battle of memory and speed, we tend to think in terms of value added. Does she read more skillfully this year than last year? Might we, every year, tape-record a session in which she reads and explains what she has read? Would we know how to assess such a performance? Would that tell us more about what we and she want to know?

There we go, being Progressive again. We would like to include some joy in these places of learning, and we believe that each will enhance the other. Rather than boredom and, worse, fear in that journey, there is joy for both student and teacher. It is individual, time-consuming, frustrating at times, and worthwhile. It may look messy to some. To us it is, on the deepest level, the only orderly way to proceed.

Theodore R. Sizer
Nancy Faust Sizer
Harvard Graduate School of Education

Instead of the sense that each child should be stacked up against all others in a battle of memory and speed, we tend to think in terms of value added. Does she read more skillfully this year than last year?

A single American high school would be a novel concept. And the arguments made in the Winter 2006 forum are undeniably valuable to the dialogue about high-school reform. However, the debate about the current status of the high school assumes that a single American high school really exists.

In fact, secondary education in the United States is so complex that we have not resolved the question of a single high school in more than a century of trying. Chester Finn hits the exposed nerve when he says a lack of “common metrics by which to gauge progress” is the real culprit. Dr. Richard Thomas, executive director, the School Administrators Association of New York State, says, “NCLB is necessary, but not sufficient.”

Although they must be given, tests are just the tip of the iceberg. Unfortunately, I am not convinced that we possess the national will to look below the surface at what is drawing student achievement down. If we can’t agree on testing, I am convinced we won’t broach the meatier issues affecting high-school students.

As I think about what I accomplished today, as a high-school principal, I can say that I got into two classrooms, barely. My day began with an emotionally disturbed girl who had been raped by a family friend, another girl upset at being called a baby killer by a student who found out about her abortion, a parentless boy caught smoking … and that was before first period. Reform that scenario, and high-school achievement will follow!

James D. Donnelly Jr.
Principal, James A. Greene H.S.
Dolgeville, New York

Underground Education

I was impressed by James Tooley’s story of private schools in developing countries (“Underground Education,” features, Fall 2005). It is an exemplary case of field research, which tells us two key things: official statistics on school enrollment in less-developed countries neglect the informal sector of education; and students from informal schools outperform students from formal schools, either public or private.

I prefer to use “informal” sector rather than “private” sector because we are not dealing with a traditional market for education. Most of the unrecognized schools visited by Tooley’s research team probably do not pay taxes, which could help explain their economic viability. Also, public schools could be more expensive than informal ones if we take into account...
transportation costs, clothes, and books. It’s also possible that poor families are more likely to be excluded when scarce slots are filled at the public schools.

Another explanation for the viability of informal schools in these countries is an excess supply of teachers: if teachers’ unemployment drives their “reservation wage” down far enough, given the minimal investment in buildings, there is a possibility of making a living by supplying teaching services in the market.

None of this explains these schools’ better performance, however. Professor Tooley’s comparisons adjust statistically for differences in students’ background characteristics. Although unobserved differences in student ability alone do not offer a satisfactory explanation for his findings, one alternative involves parental motivation. If poor parents sacrifice to send their children to school, they must be confident in the validity of the investment, and the child feels the corresponding pressure to make good on the investment.

Daniele Checchi
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University of Milan–Italy

Charter School Research

Has Education Next’s confidence in charter schools as a promising school-reform strategy evaporated? It’s hard to imagine another explanation for Marci Kanstoroom’s preemptive strike against the major federal charter schools research study currently in the field (“Looking in the Wrong Place,” from the editors, Fall 2005).

Kanstoroom is concerned that the study examines only students in middle school and excludes those in elementary schools. The reason for this decision is clear enough: because of the study’s randomized field-trial design, the researchers needed to establish a baseline at the grade when students enter the charter school. Thus including elementary schools would mean studying, and testing, kindergartners. Because states don’t test these young students, the researchers would have to do so themselves, which would add significantly to the cost of a study whose expenses already number in the multiple millions.

So what’s wrong with examining middle schools? Kanstoroom’s first argument is that they represent “only 20 percent” of the nation’s 3,400 charter schools. But the proportion of students in middle schools is the same for regular public schools as for charter schools. By Kanstoroom’s logic, we should never study regular middle schools either.

She also argues that “two studies appear to confirm that charter schools are most effective for students who enter at an early age.” Set aside for a moment that these two studies, no matter how rigorous, can’t come close to settling such an important policy question. What if Kanstoroom is right? Should state legislators amend their laws to outlaw all charters except those starting with kindergarten? Should we shut down every KIPP middle school in the country?

Kanstoroom is right that “no single study will ever tell us about all charter schools,” and this federal effort is no exception. It’s not perfect, and its designers faced tough choices and trade-offs. Still, it is the first-ever large-scale effort to apply randomized field trials to charter schools. We’ll learn a lot from it; maybe even that middle-school charters can be effective, after all.

Michael J. Petrilli
Vice President
Thomas B. Fordham Foundation

Marci Kanstoroom replies:

Mike Petrilli is, of course, correct that we are likely to learn a good deal about the effectiveness of charter middle schools from the study I criticized. But the study, which the U.S. Department of Education calls the “Evaluation of the Impact of Charter School Strategies,” is the federal government’s one and only multimillion-dollar effort to evaluate charter schooling as an innovation. Focusing this national evaluation on charter middle schools—which research already suggests are weaker than charter schools admitting younger students—is akin to reviewing a restaurant after sampling only its soups.

The Gates Foundation

I respect Paul Hill and his work. However, he mistakenly interprets the Gates Foundation’s new direction (“A Foundation Goes to School,” features, Winter 2006) as a move away from the ideas of “Progressives” and a victory for the moderates/conservatives. I do not speak for the Gates Foundation, but from my vantage point, Tom Vander Ark [director of the foundation’s education programs] and his staff have always been highly eclectic and pragmatic in their grant-making. (For the record, I am not “gone” from the foundation, as Hill claims. I have had
a continuing consulting contract with it since 1999, and my current title is “senior fellow.” I work with grantees and coach Gates program officers on strategies for strengthening instructional leadership.

But I wonder what Hill means by “Progressive.” I am troubled by the tendency in education to oversimplify problems and pigeonhole people. For myself, I have indeed been influenced by the work of Ted Sizer and Deborah Meier; they and their associates have done some of the most important education R & D of the past quarter century. However, I have advocated “conservative” ideas, such as a national literacy/citizenship assessment and new approaches to strengthening school and district accountability. And the “populist” side of me has urged educators, parents, and business and community leaders to work together to rethink what students need to know in the 21st century and to “reinvent” schools, teaching, and curriculum in order to motivate all students to want to achieve success.

TONY WAGNER
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Race Talk
I appreciate Nathan Glazer’s taking the time to review my book, Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School (book review, Winter 2006). However, he neglected the core point of the book: that “race talk dilemmas” plague American educators on a daily basis. Deep dilemmas regarding when and how to talk and not talk racially about people, practices, programs, policies, and patterns also plague researchers who care about accurate analyses and the effects of such public discourse (or lack of it) on children. Race-talk dilemmas are a key aspect of American education; they are the phenomenon that Colormute is all about.

Both clumsy race talk and actively not talking about race (I call the latter colormuteness) can make things worse.

Glazer seems frustrated that I keep these dilemmas in mind through 300 pages. “She seems to want the teachers to recognize and be more straightforward in their talk about racial realities,” he writes; “but she does not want them to acknowledge straightforwardly that blacks, Latinos, and Samoans are the problem.” Yet in education, both clumsy race talk and actively not talking about race (I call the latter colormuteness) can make things worse. This is the reality of American education: we are a nation plagued by racial inequality, by attempts to ignore racial disparities, and by clumsy and reductionist attempts to discuss them. For any educator in any real American school, how to talk about race, and when, is an ongoing question of practice and policy.

Colormute attempts to assist educators not only by outlining some tactics for skillful race talk, but also by laying out core dilemmas of race talk and colormuteness for educators themselves to consider. By analyzing their own race talk and colormuteness, educators, as intelligent adults, can make decisions about when and how it helps to talk about race and when and how it harms.

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