No Easy Answers
Untangling race and education

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
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 are professors of social work, at Wisconsin and Columbia respectively, and their 16 co-contributors to Steady Gains and Stalled Progress are all social scientists as well. That disciplinary divide results in some marked differences in approach. Wolters constructs a largely chronological history since the first half century of the 1954 Brown decision, and his case studies of desegregation-in-action 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. Seeking to isolate the multiple factors that combine to determine educational outcomes, the social scientists mine the mother lode of educational research in the United States: the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). 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.

Both of these books make for uncomfortable reading. The essays in Steady Gains and Stalled Progress frequently bring to mind the 1966 Coleman Report, which found, to the great surprise of the author and others, that none of the 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. Four decades on, one senses the determination of Magnuson, Waldfogel, and their colleagues to avoid a similar finding. Time and again, however, these scrupulous researchers are forced to conclude that the evidence is mixed or unclear. Just occasionally are they less equivocal, as when they observe that aggressive integration policies helped black children during the 1970s, that mounting socioeconomic inequality after the late 1980s contributed to the subsequent widening in the test-score gap, and that inequality in the preschool environment plays an important role in determining later educational outcomes. When encountering these passages in Steady Gains and Stalled Progress, one grasps 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 just how policymakers might go about using this book to improve educational outcomes for minority children. One is left wondering 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.”
Wolters’s book is discomfiting for a different reason. He considers it likely that there are hereditary differences in intelligence between blacks and whites, argues that human beings are intrinsically and elementally race conscious and race proud, and concludes that social engineering efforts to force the races together are doomed to have profoundly unhappy consequences. For all this, Wolters does not hanker after Jim Crow: 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. In order to distance himself from charges of racism, 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).

Race and Education takes a close look at 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 finds that wherever integration was attempted, the result was disastrous to the education system, to both races, and to race relations.

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. Wolters seems unable to assimilate any evidence that might suggest a more positive assessment, while grasping 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 rigorous reading of the available statistical evidence, Wolters derives sweeping conclusions from a strikingly limited empirical foundation. In each case, the approach is likely to prevent the volume from having a very substantial impact.

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