

# Race, Education, and the Pursuit of Equality in the Twenty-First Century

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Published online: 2 December 2014  
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W.E.B. Du Bois, the renowned African American historian and sociologist, predicted that the question of the “color line” would be the primary problem for American society in the twentieth century (Du Bois 1903). Decades later, Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal characterized America’s race problem as a moral dilemma, one that threatened the veracity of the nation’s proclaimed commitment to equality and democracy (Myrdal 1944). Sixty years after the 1954 decision rendered by the US Supreme Court in *Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka*, it appears that both Du Bois and Myrdal were correct; race continues to be a source of controversy and conflict in American society, and the condition of racial minorities, particularly African Americans, makes a mockery of America’s commitment to “freedom and justice for all” (Jaynes and Williams 1989).

Undoubtedly, the reason that race continues to be a persistent source of controversy in American society is because there has been so little progress in addressing the legacy of racism and racial discrimination. Ta-Nehisi

Coates (2014), in his persuasive case for reparations, documents the numerous ways in which the legacy of slavery has contributed to the prevalence of racial inequality in wealth and opportunity today.<sup>1</sup> Law professor Michelle Alexander (2010) and sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2009) reinforce this point, documenting the continuities between slavery, the institutionalization of Jim Crow racial segregation in most facets of American life, and the emergence of mass incarceration as a system of social control. Similar studies on racial disparities in health (Auerbach et al. 2000), housing (Massey 1998; Rothstein 2014), and political participation (United States Census Bureau 2014) reinforce the larger, disturbing narrative: The journey toward racial justice is far from over, and in some areas, has barely evinced signs of progress.

Sadly, and perhaps not surprisingly, similar patterns of paralysis are evident in the effort to secure racial equality in education. Though the 1954 *Brown* decision was undoubtedly an important historical milestone in that it brought about a formal end to America’s own legally sanctioned version of Apartheid (Omi and Winant 1986), with every year that passes since its rendering, the decision recedes further in its importance. Today, there is substantial evidence that schools have become more segregated on the basis of race and class (Orfield and Eaton 1996; Orfield et al. 2014). After notable progress in reducing racial segregation in American schools in the decades after *Brown*, since the 1980s, de facto racial segregation has grown (Orfield et al. 2014). Nationwide, 74 % of African Americans and 80 % of Latinos attend schools where the majority of students are from the same racial background (Orfield et al. 2012). Furthermore, more often

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<sup>1</sup> This was one of the most widely read essays ever published by *The Atlantic*.

than not, America's poorest children of color are concentrated together, typically in under-resourced schools that struggle to meet students' academic and social needs (Orfield and Lee 2006).

Despite assertions from policymakers and pundits that education is the civil rights issue of the twenty-first century,<sup>2</sup> the pursuit of integration has largely halted and segregation has become increasingly difficult to detect. In a series of rulings, the courts have removed or eliminated many of the legal tools that were once used to promote, encourage, or even mandate integration in schools (Miliken and Bradley 1974; Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District 2007; see Garland 2013; Orfield and Eaton 1996). Aside from their pronouncements about the linkage between education and civil rights, politicians have largely been silent about the retreat from racial integration, even though empirical evidence shows that racial isolation in schools is growing. When one considers the bitter and highly contentious battles over school bussing that were waged in places like South Boston, Massachusetts, Prince Edward County, Virginia, and numerous others across the USA, the silence of policymakers is even more stunning (Lukas 1986; Titus 2011). When one considers that in 1957, a Republican President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, felt compelled to dispatch federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas to counter the violent mobs that sought to prevent enforcement of his executive order calling for African American students be enrolled at Central High School, the current silence about the lack of progress in school integration seems truly dismaying.

School integration is of course only one of the several important areas where race and education intersect in salient and controversial ways. Race and class figure prominently in a variety of educational issues including the so-called achievement gap, school choice, and bi-lingual education. Race is also implicated in seemingly race-neutral issues like school reform and performance,<sup>3</sup> special education (Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders 2012; Donovan and Cross 2002), school discipline (Losen and Martinez 2013; US Department of Justice 2014), and

college readiness (ACT 2014; Lee Jr. and Ransom 2011). Of course these issues are profoundly influenced by persistent and pervasive inequality both in schools (particularly with respect to funding) and beyond. In many respects, racial disparities in educational outcomes mirror racial disparities in health, wealth, access to housing and employment, and other critical matters that influence quality of life (Barton and Coley 2010; Carnoy 1994; Carter and Welner 2013; Hacker 1992). These pervasive disparities serve as the context that shapes and gives meaning to other educational issues even though the connections among them are often unmentioned. Policymakers and often the media generally prefer to discuss the state of public education without any reference to how it may be influenced by racial inequity. School choice is proposed and debated as a strategy for school improvement because its proponents contend it can ensure access to "quality" schools, and not because it might be used to further racial integration. Disparities in test scores, graduation rates, and other academic outcomes are analyzed and discussed without reference to the ways these issues are influenced by inequalities in income and wealth, or exacerbated by unequal access to learning opportunities (e.g., advanced placement courses, science laboratories, qualified teachers, etc.) (Guryan 2001; Rothstein 2004). Increasingly, on matters pertaining to education policy, it is as if *Plessy* and the pursuit of separate but equal were the law of the land rather than *Brown* (Bell 2004).

This special issue of *RASP* takes on many of these important educational issues. The scholars who have contributed the articles provide new perspectives and information on the state of racial integration (Ayscue and Orfield; Rothstein), even as they also address new issues: teacher expectations and biases (Kozlowski), parental aspirations (Salgado), perceptions of racial bias in school discipline (Winn and Winn), the lack of diversity in the curriculum (de los Ríos, Lopez, and Morrell), charter schools (Stulberg), and eco-Apartheid (Akom, Shah, and Nakai). By broadening the analysis of race and education to new topics, the authors help us to understand why issues related to race continue to be the source of ongoing conflict and debate in communities across the country. The articles in this special issue also remind us of the complexities related to race and education, and compel us to think deeply about what can and should be done to ameliorate the numerous problems facing American society.

These articles also serve as a poignant reminder that Du Bois' prediction about the "problem of the color line" was correct not just for the twentieth century, but for the twenty-first century as well. Moreover, they compel us to acknowledge that Myrdal's alarm over America's moral dilemma has not dissipated; it is very much a reality today even if the "savage inequalities" decried by authors like

<sup>2</sup> US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has described education as "the civil rights issue of the twenty-first century" on numerous occasions. Though he and others who use the phrase never follow it with an explanation of how education should be used to advance civil rights, the slogan continues to have considerable currency among both Democrats and Republicans. Some of the other public officials who have borrowed this phrase include former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg (and his Chancellor Joel Klein), former President Bill Clinton, and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie (for a critique of facile associations between education and civil rights, see Barry 2011; Jones 2014; Ravitch 2012, 2013; Rogers 2013).

<sup>3</sup> The majority of schools identified as "failing" by the US Department of Education predominantly serve low-income, minority students (see US Department of Education 2011, 2012).

Kozol (1991) do not register the same degree of concern today. In these articles, the authors explore the various dimensions of America's racial dilemma in education through original empirical research and critical analysis. Our goal in presenting them together is to remind readers that a great deal still needs to be done.

Some of these papers also provide direction on how to approach the obstacles that lie ahead. In so doing, they remind us that if we are to make greater progress on the journey to achieving racial equality in education, we will have to confront the many ways in which we continue to be obstructed and thwarted. If nothing else, our collective lack of progress in pursuing racial integration and equity in education over the last few years should tell us that these issues will not fade or fix themselves over time.

By 2041, most demographers project that those who have historically been in the minority (at least as determined by membership in specified racial and ethnic groups) will be in the majority (Clark 1998; García 2005), and those who previously were in the majority (those we have historically categorized as “whites”) will constitute a new minority. It is predicted that by 2050, more than one third of US children will be of Latino origin (Murphey et al. 2014). We have yet to fully understand what these shifts will mean for America's future, but we know for sure that major changes are inevitable. As the one institution charged with providing access to all children regardless of their backgrounds, education will play an important role in shaping patterns of mobility in the years ahead. Education can either serve as the ultimate guardian and guarantor of the American Dream, or as the means through which existing inequities are reproduced over time. Whatever role it plays there is little doubt that education will profoundly influence the kind of nation we become.

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