

## BOOK REVIEW

# Race, Schools, and Hope: African Americans and School Choice After Brown

By Lisa M. Stulberg, Teachers College Press, 2008, 213 pp.

Review by Sarah Klevan, New York University

In the introduction to *Race, Schools, and Hope: African Americans and School Choice after Brown*, Lisa Stulberg explains that one of the principal aims of her book is to expand the conversation around post-*Brown* African American school choice, a movement that she feels has been inaccurately represented by current historical and sociological accounts. She is especially concerned by the rhetoric of school choice opponents, from both ends of the political spectrum, which characterizes choice movements as unequivocal rejections of racial integration and American public schooling. These concerns inform the central questions of her book: “How can school choice be a form of both giving up on American public schools *and* a form of hope and faith in American schooling (sic)?” and “How can many who oppose school choice paint its proponents as hopeless and desperate parents and educators who have given up on American education, yet school choice advocates over the past 50 years, particularly African American advocates, talk about schools as if they hold so much promise?” (p. 2). The central argument of Stulberg’s book is that the politically charged nature of the dialogue around African American School choice movements has resulted in a narrow perception of choice movements as anti-desegregation and anti-public schooling. The aim of her book is to complicate the conversation around African American school choice by showing that choice movements have been important sites for debate around key political and race issues, rather than clear rejections of public education and desegregation.

Stulberg’s book is divided into two sections that encompass four case stud-

ies of African American school choice movements. The first section, which draws upon historical archival research, describes the New York community control movement of the 1960s, the independent school movement of the 1970s, and the voucher programs of the 1990s. The second section of the book is dedicated to her fourth case study of African American school choice, the charter school movement of the 1990s, and the current decade. This section draws upon ethnographical data collected by Stulberg and tells the story of the West Oakland Charter School (WOCS), of which she was a founding member. She describes the founding of WOCS as well as the challenges and successes faced by the school. Additionally, she frames the story of WOCS within the political and historical context of Oakland and the national charter school movement.

Stulberg’s first case study, the community control movement, is a clear exemplar of her approach to broadening the conversation around African American school choice movements. Here, Stulberg provides an historical account of an African American community in Harlem that wrested control over a small school district that served their community, allowing them to manage hiring, budget, and curricular decisions pertaining to the district’s schools. Stulberg argues that the work of Diane Ravitch, an historian of education, characterizes the dominant view of the community control movement. Ravitch’s writing on the community control movement frames the leaders of this movement as militant separatists and bemoans what is perceived as a complete departure from desegregation as a strategy for achieving racial justice.

Stulberg complicates this perspective by describing the way in which local activists who energized the community control movement were responding to a failure of the New York City Board of Education to fulfill its promise of integrating Harlem schools. While many of these activists did not want to turn their back on the potential of integration, they also sought an immediate solution to the crisis of school failure for their students. Thus, within the community control movement, there was an internal debate around whether community control represented a necessary delay of desegregation or a rejection of desegregation as a means for achieving racial justice. Though the route these activists chose might have appeared to be nationalistic, their choices were not made from a monolithic, anti-integration perspective. By describing the motivations of the community control activists, Stulberg demonstrates that a real debate about around integration and nationalism was held within this movement. According to the author, Ravitch’s view overlooks these important nuances amongst the perspectives of the movement’s leaders.

A great strength of Stulberg’s book is her engagement with difficult questions and her persistent refusal to simplify the complex nature of school choice reforms. Stulberg’s interest is not to impose her central argument on the case studies she examines but rather to present the reality of the movements she describes in all their political, historical, and racial complexity. As a result, some of her case studies fit more neatly with her central argument than others. While this makes her book a challenging read, especially for readers with limited background in

the content of the book, Stulberg appears conscientious of her complex approach, which she mitigates through clear, specific writing and explanations of central concepts and terms. This makes the book accessible to academics and non-academics alike. Furthermore, the grounded nature of the case studies suggest that Stulberg intends to reach a wide audience, with a particular interest in engaging reformers who are invested in improving schooling options for African American students.

In framing the aims of her book, Stulberg places herself in conversation with writers and academics who oppose school choice movements on the grounds that choice movements represent distinct departures from integration as a strategy of achieving racial equity in schools. She frequently quotes Diane Ravitch, who writes from this perspective. She also quotes Tamar Jacoby, a fellow of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, and Jim Sleeper, a columnist and writer based in New York City, who hold similar views, including these perspectives

in order to characterize the dominant view of African American school choice. Given the dominant perception of school choice movements as anti-integrationist, separatist, and even militant, Stulberg's contribution to the discussion of choice movements reframes the choice debate in important ways, especially for those who are invested in the potential for choice movements to systemically alter the educational landscape for African American students.

In the conclusion of her book, Stulberg explains that current forms of school choice, primarily voucher programs and charter schools, are not positioned to systemically repair the inequities faced by African Americans in the public schooling system. She also puts forth her own perspective on school reform. "...I believe that the best model for school reform lies with an active and involved federal government, with funding and protection geared toward equity and resource distribution, but with space for local freedom, innovation and control." (p. 171). In so doing, her imperative be-

comes clear. Stulberg's aim in writing the book is to alleviate the politically charged nature of these reforms so that they can expand and become more effective for larger numbers of minority students. Like the leaders of the movements she describes, Stulberg is ultimately hopeful about the potential of choice movements to make a real difference in the educational experiences of African American students.

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## REFERENCES

- Stulberg, L. (2008). *Race, schools, and hope: African Americans and school choice after Brown*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.