

McGill Journal of Education
Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill



Jerome E. Morris. *Troubling the Waters: Fulfilling the promise of quality public schooling for Black children*. New York: Teachers College Press (2009). 216 pp. Paper: \$27.95 (ISBN: 0807750158). Cloth: \$64.00 (ISBN: 0807750166)

Robert Leblanc

Volume 44, Number 3, Fall 2009

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/039951ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/039951ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Education, McGill University

ISSN

0024-9033 (print)

1916-0666 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Leblanc, R. (2009). Review of [Jerome E. Morris. *Troubling the Waters: Fulfilling the promise of quality public schooling for Black children*. New York: Teachers College Press (2009). 216 pp. Paper: \$27.95 (ISBN: 0807750158). Cloth: \$64.00 (ISBN: 0807750166)]. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 44(3), 489–492. <https://doi.org/10.7202/039951ar>

BOOK REVIEW

JEROME E. MORRIS. *Troubling the Waters: Fulfilling the promise of quality public schooling for Black children*. New York: Teachers College Press (2009). 216 pp. Paper: \$27.95 (ISBN: 0807750158). Cloth: \$64.00 (ISBN: 0807750166).

The Negro needs neither segregated nor mixed schools. What he needs is an education. (Du Bois, 1935)

It has become a virtual truism to say a gap exists in achievement between Black and White students in America today (Cooper & Jordan, 2005; Ferguson, 2005; Grissmer, Flanagan, & Williamson, 1998; Lee, 2004; Lee, 2006; National Reading Panel, 2000; Roderick, 2005). And while programs such as No Child Left Behind and Head Start drape themselves in the language of moral imperatives, the stark reality is that for far too many Black children living in the United States school continues to be a place of iniquitous and staggering marginalization long after the landmark ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) sought to create a level playing field: Black students are disproportionately identified for special education programming in comparison to their peers (Cooper & Jordan, 2005; US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1995), half as likely to be placed into classes with gifted programming (Hopkins, 1997), and continue to score lower on high-stakes testing than their White counterparts (Hopkins, 1997; Lee, 2006). In short, the “promise of *Brown*” has not yet been fulfilled.

It is in this milieu of continued structural failings on the part of schools that Jerome E. Morris seeks to reinvigorate the discussion of what a quality education means for Black children. What distinguishes Morris from the majority of scholars working on this problem today is that central to his argument is W.E.B. Du Bois’ call to consider equity beyond desegregation and to consider what kind of role predominately Black schools might play in Black education. He notes here that typical scholarship on Black education focuses on “achieving racially balanced schools rather than also considering the extent to which Black children might receive quality schooling across school context—whether Black, predominantly White, or integrated” (p. 15). For Morris, this kind of simple

rhetoric is not enough. He seeks to highlight through extensive fieldwork in four Atlanta and St. Louis schools the tender balance between the laudable goal of desegregation championed by *Brown* and the pivotal place Black schools have in Black communities.

Broken into three parts, Morris' ethnographic research provides a window into the desegregation effort in Atlanta and St. Louis, and reframes the debate to consider not only the level of integration schools have achieved but also the quality and experience of education for Black children in those schools. His findings are frank: for Black students who leave traditionally Black schools for magnet or predominantly White schools outside the cities, their experience is one of continued challenge and marginalization. For Black students in Black schools, however, he finds children able to succeed in culturally welcoming environments which serve as an anchor for the community. Using a variety of interviews with teachers, students, parents and administration, as well as several years of participant observation, Morris creates a thick description of the cultural concerns of Black schooling and the perpetual role that race plays in education, despite neoconservative protestations to the contrary.

Part 1 of the book is an overview of the vigorous debate around desegregation and the unwillingness of Black people to limit *Brown's* promise of quality education to desegregation. This section contextualizes *Brown* within a broader conversation of Black civil rights during the 1950s and 60s, and a contentious discussion among Black leaders as to the best approach for helping Black people maintain control over their own education. Narrowing the focus, this section further provides historical background to St. Louis' and Atlanta's slow road to integration and the 'hollowing out' of urban centers by Whites following Black migrations to the cities. Here, Morris demonstrates how Black schools have become the subject of derision in contemporary discourse thanks to limited budgeting, poverty among the student body, and systematic exclusion from the levers of power.

Part 2 is a critique of desegregated education in two sites: a magnet school and integrated school in St. Louis. Both seem to suffer from what Morris deems "the invisibility of black people" (p. 69), whether it be teachers, parents, or administrators. While Black parents intentionally seek out these schools as part of St. Louis' voluntary transfer program, they quickly discovered that their input is not welcome, their children are labeled as 'slow' or 'city kids', and that the schools' integration of Black culture is largely token. Furthermore, transfer programs which allow students to attend schools outside their community often lure key students from Black schools to attend institutions miles away from home. Morris argues that this policy cripples Black inner city schools by robbing them of their best students and removing the local school as the locus of community life. Integration is exposed here as simply the first step to equitable education- the remainder of the steps have seemingly yet to be taken.

Part 3 provides an alternative picture to the typical representation of urban black schools as ‘crumbling’ and ‘unable to compete.’ Morris highlights two successful schools, Lincoln and Fairmont Elementary, to unveil the promise of all-Black schools in meeting the needs of students. Common to these two schools is an affirmation of Black culture through song, dress and curriculum, a high proportion of Black educators, and a seamless ability to integrate parents into the life of the schools. Perhaps most relevant to this is the location of the schools: children who attend Fairmont and Lincoln Elementary live within reasonable distance, thus allowing the schools to serve as a pillar of the Black community.

At its rhetorical height, Morris’ book provides a generous argument for the cultural necessity of Black schools. While other scholarship is content to provide statistical measures of desegregation efforts as proof of harmonized racial tension, this book reminds the reader of the crucial place ethnography can serve by teasing out close description; the truth of a Black person’s experience of schools is found in the unquantifiable nuance of a teacher’s clothing, the songs at an assembly, and the ease with which a parent can enter the premise. Thus, Morris’ argument is emboldened by his commitment to fluidly integrate narrative and interview transcriptions into the text in order to provide a voice from the buildings themselves.

Despite a convincing socio-cultural critique of modern American schooling, the book’s argument fails to point a much-deserved finger at one of the leading culprits in continued structural inequalities for Black children: No Child Left Behind (NCLB). While Morris provides passing mention of NCLB and its unwieldy institutional structure, he does not interrogate the legislation and its continued negative consequences on Black education, thus failing to elucidate a critique of what is undoubtedly a core factor to continual marginalization (Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Hursch, 2007; Lee, 2006; McNeil, 2000; Rodrick, 2005). His critique of integrated and magnet schools is mostly cultural, highlighting the dissonance for Black parents and children in their experience of White schooling, but the next piece to include should be an examination of how NCLB exacerbates this dissonance by mandating fixed programming and providing systematic escapes for schools to continually disregard or even weed out Black students (Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Hursch, 2007; Kozol, 2006). In modern America, NCLB is not simply one factor in determining cultural dissonance in schools but is in fact a cornerstone.

In sum, this book highlights that while structural adjustments can help eliminate some of the gross inequities that exist at an institutional level, they cannot wipe away persistent racism. Morris’ call for federal and state support of Black schools is not a rejection of the noble intent of *Brown*, but is instead a pragmatic realization that despite structural remedies, Black students remain inexplicably second-class citizens in White schools (Kozol, 2006). This approach is bound

to garner controversy, notably in the wake of the Obama administration's commitment to voucher programs and open-ended choice as a virtual panacea to educational issues. If the answer were simply choice or integration, it could be expected that Black achievement and experience would have improved by now; studies have shown just the opposite (Lee, 2006). Choice is therefore a red herring. What Morris is instead calling for is a nuanced approach to understanding Black experiences of school. For him, this means a long look at the promise of *Brown* and the willingness to understand the intent of civil rights activists as still unfulfilled in desegregation. And though this type of talk may ring strange on liberal ears, who like to rest easy knowing Black students have access to predominately White schools, it remains true that all is not calm for Black children in education and that the waters of schooling still need to be troubled.

ROBERT LEBLANC, *McGill University*

REFERENCES

- Cooper, R. & Jordan, W. J. (2005). Cultural Issues in Comprehensive School Reform. In O.S. Fashola (Ed.) *Educating African American Males*. (p. 1-18). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Diamond, J. B. & Spillane, J. P. (2004). High-stakes accountability in urban elementary schools: Challenging or reproducing inequality? *Teachers College Record*, 106(6), 1145-1176.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1935). Does the Negro need separate schools? *Journal of Negro Education*, 4(3), 328-335.
- Ferguson, R. F. (2005) Teachers' perceptions and expectations and the black-white test score gap. In O.S. Fashola (Ed.) *Educating African American Males*. (p.79-128). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Grissmer, D., Flanagan, A., & Williamson, S. (1998). Why did the Black-White test score gap narrow in the 1970s and 1980s? In C. Jencks & M. Phillips (Eds.), *The Black-White test score gap*. (pp. 401-427). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Heilig, J. V. & Darling-Hammond, L. (2008). Accountability Texas-style: The progress and learning of urban minority students in a high-stakes testing context. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 30(2), 75-110.
- Hursh, D. (2007). Exacerbating inequality: The failed promise of No Child Left Behind. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 10(3), 295-308.
- Kozol, J. (2006b). Success for all: Trying to make an end run around inequality and segregation. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 87(8), 624-626.
- Lee, C. (2004). *Racial segregation and educational outcomes in metropolitan Boston*. Boston, MA: The Civil Rights Project of Harvard University.
- Lee, J. (2006). *Tracking achievement gaps and assessing the impact of NCLB on the gaps: an in-depth look into national and state reading and math outcomes trends*. Boston, MA: The Civil Rights Project of Harvard University.
- McNeil, L. (2000). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. New York: Routledge.
- National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. Washington, DC: NICHD.
- Roderick, M. (2005). What's happening to the boys? Early high school experiences and school outcomes among African American male adolescents in Chicago. In O. S. Fashola (Ed.) *Educating African American males* (pp. 151-227). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (1995). *The condition of education*. Washington, DC: Author.