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RACE-CLASS RELATIONS
AND INTEGRATION IN SECONDARY
EDUCATION

THE CASE OF MILLER HIGH

CAROLINE EICK
To Emmanuel, Francesca, Joseph, and Annie
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Series Editors’ Foreword

Among the educational issues affecting policy makers, public officials, and citizens in modern, democratic, and industrial societies, none has been more contentious than the role of secondary schooling. In establishing the Secondary Education in a Changing World series with Palgrave Macmillan, our intent is to provide a venue for scholars in different national settings to explore critical and controversial issues surrounding secondary education. We envision our series as a place for the airing and resolving of these controversial issues.

More than a century has elapsed since Emile Durkheim argued the importance of studying secondary education as a unity, rather than in relation to the wide range of subjects and the division of pedagogical labor of which it was composed. Only thus, he insisted, would it be possible to have the ends and aims of secondary education constantly in view. The failure to do so accounted for a great deal of difficulty with which secondary education was faced. First, it meant that secondary education was “intellectually disorientated,” between “a past which is dying and a future which is still undecided,” and as a result “lacks the vigor and vitality which it once possessed” (Durkheim 1938/1977, p. 8). Second, the institutions of secondary education were not understood adequately in relation to their past, which was “the soil which nourished them and gave them their present meaning, and apart from which they cannot be examined without a great deal of impoverishment and distortion” (10). And third, it was difficult for secondary school teachers, who were responsible for putting policy reforms into practice, to understand the nature of the problems and issues that prompted them.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, Durkheim’s strictures still have resonance. The intellectual disorientation of secondary education is more evident than ever as it is caught up in successive waves of policy changes. The connections between the present and the past have become increasingly hard to trace and untangle. Moreover, the distance between policy makers, on the one hand, and practitioners on the other has rarely seemed as immense as it is today. The key mission of the current series of
books is, in the spirit of Durkheim, to address these underlying dilemmas of secondary education and to play a part in resolving them.

In *Race-Class Relations and Integration in Secondary Education*, Caroline Eick examines student relationships in the years between 1950 and 2000 at Miller High School, a pseudonym for a comprehensive high school in Baltimore County, Maryland. At the heart of her account is the story of how three generations of Miller students interpreted their school experiences and in the process negotiated issues of class, race, gender, and nationality. The events that she describes occurred in the larger context of the struggle in the United States, the South, and Maryland to racially integrate the schools in response to the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision.

Hers is an oral history that focuses on the testimonies of graduates during these three generations and considers the extent to which the relationships that were built during their time in school carried over into their adult lives. She identifies these groups as the Divided Generation (1950–1969), the Border-Crossing Generation (1970–1985), and the Redivided Generation (1986–2000). Students, both high school and college, are prominently featured in much of the current scholarship on the civil rights movement and student activism. What distinguishes Eick’s work is the fact that she goes further than most studies that explore the political roles of students during the struggles that occurred during these years surrounding desegregation. Her focus is on how students’ situated identities, within intersections of class, race, gender, and nationality, were shaped by and in turn shaped institutional norms. It is the story of how students of different backgrounds at different times established relationships that propelled forward the alternative forces of integration and segregation.

In the book, Eick uses the outlook and skills of the oral historian to explore a place that has often been ignored in our histories of school desegregation. Her account places the meanings, beliefs, and perceptions of those participants in the foreground. It recognizes that personal memories are not simply objective descriptions of events. Rather, they are in her words, “…gendered, racialized, and class-based.” They remind us that the same events may be seen differently by the various individuals and groups who participate in this or that historical event.

Eick sees her volume as offering an important contrast to another book—Gerald Grant’s *The World We Created at Hamilton High* (1988). There is, she notes, an important difference between the two books. Grant’s account, as she sees it, is an overly optimistic one that views the less than positive black-white student relationships that prevailed in the school that he studied at the beginning of the movement for integration as improving over time and ending in a period that Grant himself described as constituting “genuine racial equality.” Her account, written almost a quarter of
a century later than Grant’s, tells us a less linear, progressive story. She describes demographic changes that occurred at Miller that brought into the school groups, particularly Russian Jewish immigrants, “angry black city youth,” and poorer white youth, who constructed student relationships with a racist discourse. She concludes her book by considering how in different ways the struggle for integration at Miller High both advanced and retarded the ability of these three generations of high school youth to live in the globalized world that was emerging in the last half of the twentieth century and has now fully arrived in the twenty-first.

Eick’s book is important in two key respects. It examines the mixed and incomplete results that secondary schools played in the struggle for school integration in the last half of the twentieth century and considers how in the midst of that struggle the American high school served to both unite and divide future generations. Second, her book personalizes the events surrounding one of the most contentious times in our recent history and brings those events into the day-to-day lives of individuals. Events that are typically described at the level of policy and programs become a compelling narrative of real people struggling around real events that affect their lives in deep and profound ways. It is a book that offers a more sober picture of the impact of efforts at desegregation and integration than other similar accounts of this period in our educational history.

Race-Class Relations and Integration in Secondary Education is the eleventh volume to be published in our series. It exemplifies well the combination of social, historical, and comparative approaches to secondary education that we have sought to emphasize throughout, and continues our focus on the interplay between the issues of race and education. As we see the trajectory of the series advancing during the next few years, our intent is to seek additional volumes that bring these issues still further to the attention of studies in secondary education.

Barry M. Franklin
Gary McCulloch
Series Co-editors

References


Preface

The Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which struck down public school segregation in 1954, was, for a segment of black and white liberals, a hopeful legislation.¹ Many believed that desegregating public schools would increase economic opportunities for less-advantaged students and attune the more privileged to issues of social justice;² and that having practiced meeting across economic, racial, ethnic, and cultural divides during their formative years, generations of students would grow up to be adults who continued to meet across those divides; and that their acquired habits of association would translate into a citizenry who more equitably shared in the political, economic, and social life of its democracy.

However, resistance to school desegregation in the South and the North, by whites and blacks, before and after *Brown*, would challenge what some historians have identified as the power of an educational legislation to serve as a “catalyst for substantial changes in social relations and policies outside of school.”³ Our nation’s story of school desegregation would be further complicated by the second-largest wave of immigration within a century in U.S. history.⁴ By the 1990s, the meanings attached to categories of racial identity had gained considerable complexity as more diverse peoples entered a country sensitized to issues of civil rights and multiculturalism.⁵ Against an imagination of greater equity and opportunity, too many immigrant children of color continued to be funneled into the lower academic tracks of our nation’s public schools. Too often they were misdiagnosed as needing special education, and too often trapped in English-language learner classes, out of which they never graduated.⁶ Thus at the turn of the twenty-first century, the expectations that might have been attached to *Brown v. Board* by some remain unrealized.⁷

As I write this history, 90 percent of U.S. citizens own a mere 29 percent of the wealth of this nation;⁸ schools are more segregated even as the population has grown more diverse;⁹ and the number of sexual, ethnic, and religious hate crimes has risen.¹⁰ A cursory glance at our nation’s economic disparities and at the racial, ethnic, and recently renewed religious tensions reveals a divided citizenry ill at ease with diversity. Still, we have
primarily continued to entrust schools with the task of bringing us closer together, politically and economically. From *Brown v Board of Education* in 1954, to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, to the Bilingual Education Act sanctioned by the Supreme Court in 1974, to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, and to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, we have, over the course of the last half of the twentieth century, continually reappointed schools as our nation’s equalizing forces and entrusted them with closing gaps and bridging divides.

Domestically, the story of our pluralistic democracy in the latter part of the twentieth century has been in great part the story of the relationship between our nation’s schools and its citizens. Understanding ourselves as diverse peoples occupying shared social spaces at the turn of the twenty-first century is to understand the spaces that we have occupied within desegregated schools over the latter part of the twentieth century; it is to understand the generational transmission of school-acquired habits of association—in sum, to understand school over time from diverse students’ points of view.

More than any U.S. institution, public schools have progressively assembled greater numbers of diverse citizens on a daily basis within confined spaces and against their preference or explicit will. In particular, it is within desegregated comprehensive public high schools that the greatest numbers of students at the brink of full citizen participation have continued to meet across economic, racial, ethnic, cultural, national, and religious divides over the past half-century. Patrick Ryan suggests that “more than any other institution, the increasingly comprehensive high schools of the twentieth century redefined the social lives of American youths . . . [and that] our interpretation of [the comprehensive high school] should be central to our understanding of the country.”

Our interpretation of diverse students’ relationships with one another, in an institution “as indicative of American society as any institution,” should be central to our understanding of diverse peoples in the United States—particularly at a time in humanity’s history when global interdependence is accelerating. How we construct relationships across differences within our own borders, how we bridge or carve divides in our own backyard, will shape how we construct our shared humanity beyond our borders. At a time when we are actively participating in the massification of education across the world, while “we are neither very united nor very comfortable with our diversity,” it is important to take stock of our civic relationships as they have developed since *Brown v. Board*, when we officially attempted to redefine them.

This history explores students’ relationships across gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and class divides as experienced within the architectural, academic, and extracurricular spaces of Miller High, a comprehensive high
school in Baltimore County, Maryland, during a half-century marked by desegregation, civil rights movements, suburbanization and urbanization of suburbs, and the second-largest wave of immigration in the United States within a century. It is timely for two main reasons. First, and as previously mentioned, because it contributes to a reflective examination of our national capacity for associative living across census divides since desegregation, at a time when our schools are resegregating at a rapid pace. In this sense, it is a history that sheds light on how one of our important institutions has helped to both unite and divide us—in hopes that “our future may be found in the past’s fugitive moments of [harmony] rather than” discord.16

This history is timely also because it is written when globalization is redefining the educational aims of nation-states. In addition to the dialectic tension between national democratic forces of cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity,17 a new tension has emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century between global and local forces. Scholars have begun to suggest that within this new global/local (“glocal”)18 tension, the primary purpose of education—for both developed and developing nations—will be to help citizens adapt to multiple cultural contexts and affiliations within and beyond national borders. This history, then, by bringing into view a recent half-century of student associations in a U.S. school, during a period of great social diversification, offers possibilities for considering the capacities of the U.S. educational system to educate a citizenry at once “American” and global.

My viewpoint, in telling the history of Miller High between 1950 and 2000 from the perspectives of diverse students and as revealed through alumni oral histories, is that generational memories simultaneously tell of family, community, the nation, and the world—because ground-level human experiences are many daily interwoven experiences. The experience of school is also the experience of traveling to school, and of having or lacking space to do homework at home after school; of belonging to a church whose pastor is familiar with the school principal, or living in a segregated neighborhood whose elders are rarely seen on school premises; of being brought up Republican or Democrat in a conservative or liberal town; of losing sleep over terrorist threats while still having to attend school. Individual memories, nestled within generational memories and compared across generations, powerfully tell of patterns of intersections between school, social context, and citizens’ lived experiences.

I share with the immortal historian Howard Zinn the conviction that “nations are not communities and have never been, [and that] the history of any country, presented as the history of a family, conceals fierce conflicts of interest.”19 Thus I chose to tell the history of one desegregated comprehensive high school from a ground-level perspective—that of students, but more important, from students’ situated racial, gender, ethnic, national, and
class perspectives. The world is different if one is a poor or wealthy, white or black young woman attending Miller High in the early days of desegregation—different yet from that experienced by a white or black young man, and different still across time periods as gender and race relationships change over time. I also strove not to impose preconceived affiliations between and across racial, gender, ethnic, and class differences as I collected and analyzed graduates’ experiences. I strove not to essentialize agency, but to look for evidence of it as it came. While using categories such as “race” and “ethnicity” runs the risk of perpetuating social constructs that have no basis in science, they are the categories by which the participants in this oral historical study identified themselves and others; they are the constructs that continue to distinguish the lived experiences of U.S. citizens.

I also share with philosopher Amy Gutmann the conviction that “cultivating mutual respect entails understanding people not merely as abstractions, upon whom [we project our] own conception of what constitutes a good life, but understanding people in their own particularity, with their own lives to lead and their own conceptions of what constitutes a good life.” Thus in writing this history, I strove to highlight the particularities of the lives recounted by diverse alumni as they understood them. I hoped to produce a history that cultivated mutual respect even as it examined it.

This book then is a story of U.S. diversity that tells of processes of integration as experienced by three generations of citizens during their formative years at Miller High between 1950 and 2000: the Divided Generation (1950–1960), the Border-Crossing Generation (1970–1985), and the Redivided Generation (1986–2000). It explores our capacities for associative living across differences as these were nurtured or stifled within the classrooms, hallways, and sports fields of Miller High, as well as during dances, extracurricular activities, and across academic tracks. It is at once a history of youth, of diverse students, and of race, gender, and class relations in an institution that desegregated as early as 1956, and of an evolving social context marked by shifting demographics. Over this half-century, the town transformed from rural to suburban to urban-suburban; from a predominantly white middle-class town, alongside which lived a small African American community established in the nineteenth century, to a multicultural population that by the 1990s included Russian immigrants and African American youth newly arrived from city schools.

This work rests on my conviction that the evolving story of U.S. democracy, in particular as it reflects a “world lived in common with others,” is in large part the evolving story of diverse youth in public schools, and that the strength and vitality of a just U.S. democracy rests in great part on how well its citizens learn to cross divides during their formative years.
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