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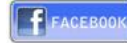
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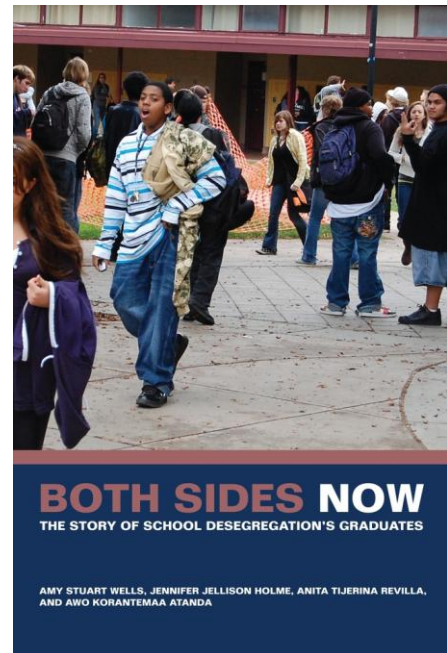
Wells, Amy Stuart ; Holme, Jennifer Jellison; Revilla, Anita Tijerina; & Atanda, Awo Korantemaa. (2009) *Both Sides Now: The Story of School Desegregation's Graduates*
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Reviewed by Casey D. Cobb
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Both Sides Now: The Story of School Desegregation's Graduates is a rich, historical account of one of our nation's boldest attempts to address racial inequalities in educational opportunity. Amy Stuart Wells, Jennifer Jellison Holme, Anita Tijerina Revilla, and Awo Korantemaa Atanda tell us the story of desegregated schools from the voices of students who encountered it firsthand. *Both Sides Now* reveals lessons learned from its participants both then and now.

This is not merely another book on school desegregation. It is a rigorous phenomenological



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study of considerable depth and scope. Its findings carry present day implications and stoke the fire of past debates over the fundamental purposes of education. It offers a strong critique of how our current fixation on accountability and choice on the cheap is problematic—from the voices of the generation that knows both sides of this era. Those of us who thought we knew the full story of school desegregation, including how and whether it worked, will be surprised by the complex findings told by Wells and her colleagues. The writing is clear, extraordinarily rich, and intensely thought provoking. Stories of schools and students are presented through vivid portraits that lend contextual detail and make the book a captivating read.

The book begins with a discussion of the sociopolitical milieu of schools during the time of desegregation and up through the turn of the century. The authors establish one of their key interpretive lenses—DuBois’ lens of double consciousness—to illustrate the complexities and challenges associated with desegregated environments. Next, the study methods are described, including the selection of settings and participants. The schools selected include six desegregated high schools located in Austin, Texas; Charlotte, North Carolina; Englewood, New Jersey; Pasadena, California; Shaker Heights, Ohio; and Topeka, Kansas. The schools were carefully chosen from a larger set of high schools and together they represent a range of historical, political, and geographical contexts in which desegregation unfolded for thousands of children and their families. The authors conducted 540 interviews over a five-year period, nearly half of which were with former students in the six schools. The remaining interviews were conducted with school officials, lawyers, and educators of varied racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds. The students—all graduates of 1980—were asked about their experiences in desegregated high schools, and about how they made meaning of those experiences today.

Subsequent chapters describe the central thematic elements through rich individual accounts and cross case comparisons. Many of the chapter titles read like song tracks on an album (e.g., “We’re All the Same—Aren’t



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We?” “Close Together but Still Apart: Friendships across Race Only Went So Far,” “Why It Was Worth It,” “More Diverse Than My Current Life,” “But That Was a Different Time,” and finally, “The Souls of Desegregated Folk”).

One of the hopes of the desegregation movement was to enhance students’ cross-cultural perspectives. Most of the participants interviewed indicated they developed new understandings of classmates of different races than their own. This is not to say these new perspectives went unchallenged internally. In interviews with several white graduates, positive attitudes toward people of color were often contradicted by simultaneous stereotypical or conservative observations. Indeed, the authors write that, “in the course of one hour, [many whites argued] that ‘people are people’ and thus that ‘everyone is the same’ while at the same time [explaining] that a larger percentage of African Americans and Latinos/Latinas in our society are poor because of their problematic culture or their failure to place enough emphasis on education and getting ahead” (p. 129). These inconsistent views exemplify the “double consciousness” put forth by Dubois.

Advances in cross-cultural understanding did not seem to translate into pro-diversity behaviors later in life for many of these adults. Indeed many of the positive elements derived from their integrated experiences in high school have been reversed today, as the majority live in racially and economically segregated communities. The white graduates tended to live in primarily white neighborhoods and send their children to mostly white, affluent schools. Black and Latino graduates were more likely than whites to seek integrated communities and schools, but these did not approach the levels of integration they experienced in their own high schools. Wells and her colleagues theorize that this re-segregation could be attributed, at least in part, to the political conservatism movement in which the 1980 graduates grew up as young adults. The authors underscore the influence of larger structural forces and explain “how difficult it was for the people in these schools to live up to the goals of school desegregation given the larger societal forces, including racial attitudes, housing segregation, economic inequality, and racial politics working against them.” (p. 84)

The advances in cross-cultural understanding among students seemed to occur osmotically during those years of integration. *Both Sides Now* speaks of the deliberate avoidance of talk about race in schools undergoing significant racial change. Its authors lament the lost opportunity to address the very racial issues the desegregation movement was intended to mitigate. There were very few if any attempts among the schools to discuss race relations openly or, better yet, to develop a curriculum around issues of race and inequality. This irony is bitter, however the authors acknowledge this was a different time and that most of the schools and the educators in them were not adequately prepared to take on these issues.

Many white educators and even students adopted a “colorblind” stance, which they either viewed as a “race-neutral” stance or one that acknowledged an “equality” among all students. Problematic to these assumptions, however, was that treatment of minority students in desegregated schools was far from equal to their white classmates—both in and outside of school. Academic tracking occurred that served to disenfranchise many black and Latino students. The authors also describe in pointed language the limitations of interracial friendships in those times. Such obstacles were attributed to parents, particularly white parents, and prevailing white attitudes toward people of color.

Readers should be wary of the study’s methods that rely on participants’ recall of events from some twenty years prior. Participants may not recall their experiences or feelings accurately, they may romanticize in ways that distort reality, or they may lean toward socially desirable answers. The authors are aware of these potential threats and do their best to establish trustworthiness in their findings. The authors view an emphasis on long-term accounts as a strength of the study compared to research that focuses only on the short-term effects of desegregation. They argue that gathering perspectives from teenagers amid such tumultuous times in the heat of the moment could detract from learning about meaningful, long-term effects. They contend that adults “understand the impact of that experience on their lives more broadly.” (p. 215) An example of this notion was a “crucial finding” offered by a former African American Shaker Heights

graduate who noted, “The gift of the experience, for me, most of all, was realized once I left.” (p. 215)

Favoring long-term consequences via adult reflection, as opposed to the real time consequences as adolescents experience them, raises an important question: Are the long-term benefits worth the short-term costs? *Both Sides Now* devotes an entire chapter to this query, the title of which implies that it was, indeed, worth it. The authors highlight the experiences of a White Jewish lawyer and an African American police lieutenant. Both expound on their appreciation of attending desegregated schools, no matter how imperfect the experience. The authors report “all the graduates—from each of the racial and ethnic groups—expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to attend a racially diverse school.” (p. 213)

Both Sides Now is one of the few research efforts that examine the long-term consequences of desegregation. The findings are useful at a time when the country is undergoing re-segregation of its schools and has little, if any, policy interest in promoting diversity in public education (Orfield & Lee, 2007). The once prized goal of integrated schools has given way to an almost singular focus on test-based accountability. Where there used to be multiple laudable, if not contested, purposes of public education, only one now reigns: an intense focus on the academic performance of individuals as narrowly measured by reading, writing, and math exams. The development of students’ academic abilities is a fundamental role of public schools, but so too are numerous other important outcomes that contribute to the well being of students and our democratic society.

Paradoxically, at the same time that schools are re-segregating, many other schools are becoming more diverse. Several states are experiencing dramatic demographic shifts, particularly in their metropolitan areas and suburbs. Racial, ethnic, and linguistic minority students are increasingly enrolling in historically white, monolingual, suburban schools. The rapid diversification of many of these schools today resembles, to some degree, the desegregation that occurred in the 1970s. Efforts to consolidate school districts, such as those in Memphis (Robertson, 2011), also invite parallels to 1970s desegregation. But many educators at these newly

integrated schools lack the know-how to address such diversity. (Howard, 2006)

Over the past three decades we have, of course, made great strides in race relations, and in preparing teachers, administrators, and school councils to educate learners from diverse backgrounds. But we are nowhere near where we could be—as witnessed by persistent racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps within and across schools, strained race relations that occur on an almost daily basis in society and in schools, and the continued racial disparities in income, education, and housing. Wells and her colleagues remind us that white privilege continues to function as a hidden, forbidding form of racial discrimination. In the communities they studied, “powerful whites were able to maintain their privileged status even in the context of an equity-minded reform movement such as school desegregation.” (p. 85)

While *Both Sides Now* looks back at school desegregation, its greatest value is in looking *forward* to inform education policy. Today’s increasingly diverse schools are being taught, as they have in the past, mostly by white, middle class teachers. (Cochran-Smith, 2004) *Both Sides Now* teaches us that a colorblind perspective among teachers of all races evades the very issues that schools are, or at least should be, equipped to address. The book also teaches us that the lack of explicit discussion in schools about race and class (another form of colorblindness) represents a missed learning opportunity. We should avoid making the same mistake today.

I recommend this book highly. It is ideal for undergraduate and graduate students majoring in education, political science, history, or public policy. High schools should also consider adding it to their social studies or English curriculums. Finally, all educators and education policy makers would gain great insight from this moving account of the graduates of our nation’s first desegregated schools.

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About the Reviewer

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