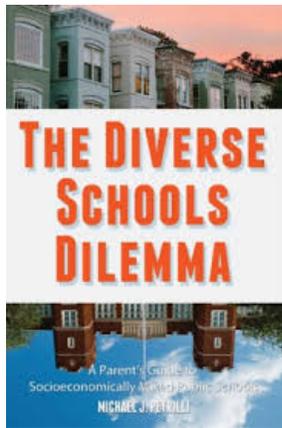


Professional Book Review

Petrilli, M.J. (2012). *The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools*. Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 119 pp., ISBN: 978-0-615-65233-7. \$11.99

Reviewed by Monica J. Taylor, Arcadia University, U. S. A.



In *The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools*, Michael J. Petrilli discusses the challenges and opportunities considered by parents when they are contemplating whether they should register their children in what he refers to as “racially and socioeconomically mixed schools” (p. 37). Through his personal frame of reference, Petrilli describes the extent to which he, as a White middle-class parent, examined concepts and issues of culture, race, and class associated with living and raising his children in a diverse inner ring suburban community outside of Washington, D.C. Weaving a narrative that includes research studies, Petrilli provides information to guide and assist parents who value diversity and are seeking the best educational setting for their child.

Many urban and suburban residential communities across the United States are changing as a result of racial and economic transformation. When children of mixed ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses reside close enough to attend the same neighborhood schools, demographic populations in their classrooms are likely to be somewhat diverse. However, heterogeneous educational communities can only exist if parents of students from varied racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds actually enroll them in their local public schools. As a result, “socioeconomic segregation within our nation’s schools has deepened since the 1980’s and continues to be a cause of educational inequality” (Orfield & Lee, 2005, p. 5).

Throughout the book, the author references institutional influences and cultural practices that typically impact educational opportunities for Black and Hispanic students and children from low-income families. Historically, these marginalized student groups have lacked access to high-quality curricula and instruction, which he believes affects outcomes such as grades, ability-group placement, and standardized test scores. Citing examples of legislative mandates that were enacted to promote equity by integrating schools such as *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954, Petrilli makes it clear that simply creating laws designed to address discriminatory policies and protocols has not ensured their effectiveness. Altering the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of educators, community stakeholders, politicians, and parents is, and historically has been, necessary for cultural responsiveness and sensitivity aimed at meeting the needs of all students.

In supporting his views of the “pros and cons” (p. 7) of attending diverse neighborhood public schools, Petrilli cites numerous studies that address both

successes and struggles of these educational institutions. With disaggregated test performance data being placed in the spotlight, rewards and sanctions are publicized for educators, schools, and districts highlighting proficiency levels for historically underperforming groups such as low-income students. From the 1966 Coleman Report which correlated students' performance with their family background, to the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 that increased pressure to continuously improve overall student achievement, the author places the demands of affluent families, along with federal mandates, at the forefront of accountability structures. While Petrilli recognizes the obligation and need to support low-achieving students, he also describes his lack of confidence in educators' abilities to differentiate instruction and simultaneously program for more affluent, high-achieving students.

One of the major drawbacks Petrilli views in diverse schools is organizational practices that aim to increase educational outcomes by tailoring instruction to the ability levels of select students. He describes this as a "dilemma-within-a-dilemma" (p. 41) that occurs when diverse schools vary in the establishment of criteria on which they rely to assign students to performance groups or tracks. Petrilli questions the effectiveness of student tracking because typically a greater proportion of minority and low-income students are assigned to lower tracks, held to different expectations, and exposed to different curriculum content. Thus these systems of privilege and preference often create "enclaves of exclusivity in schools, in which certain student groups are served well while others often experience failure and mediocrity" (Howard, 2007, p. 19).

According to Petrilli, central to thoroughly examining successful mixed-income buildings is for parents to visit and personally investigate educational institutions on suburban, magnet, and charter school campuses. In Chapter 4, Petrilli refers to examples of magnet schools that have become increasingly diverse in urban areas where admission criteria afford opportunities based on assessment data and measures of creativity. Charter schools, on the other hand, serve students whose socioeconomic status may threaten schools' exclusivity and superiority, which negatively impacts the diversity of registrants. Therefore, with the exception of a few schools in select areas in the United States, Petrilli found that economically-advantaged parents were less likely to participate in a lottery to be afforded the opportunity to send their children to diverse charter schools.

In the book's latter chapters, Petrilli outlines the disparities between the culture and demographic profiles of students and families in diverse public schools and how these factors further impact responses that address the diversity dilemma. In many school districts, residential boundaries regulate student attendance to specific buildings based on their address and/or zip code. Recognizing that these conditions may lead to school gentrification, Petrilli warns against reconstructing neighborhood schools into places stratified by income, wealth, opportunity, and influence.

Through his investigation, Petrilli discovered that income-related achievement gaps are manifested through standardized test scores, grades, graduation rates, and parent involvement trends. These were among the plethora of factors he examined when seeking to identify an appropriate educational setting for his own children. While his family valued and enjoyed living in their diverse Takoma Park, Maryland,

neighborhood, they ultimately, but reluctantly, decided to relocate to the minimally diverse suburban area of Bethesda, Maryland. The house he and his wife purchased was located near Wood Acres Elementary School which, ironically, had the district's least diverse population of students.

At the end of the book, Petrilli admits having lingering doubts surrounding the basis for his decision and its potential outcome. His analysis of the risks and benefits he considered may leave readers wondering if his family will indeed be satisfied living in a community that may not harness the same benefits of heterogeneity found in his Takoma Park neighborhood. Will their Bethesda suburban school offer access to culturally competent educators who embrace and challenge all students, as seemingly was the case in Takoma Park? Will his children be exposed to a rigorous and progressive curriculum that meets their individualized educational needs? Unanswered questions such as these serve as a great opening for a sequel!

References

- Howard, G. R. (2007). As diversity grows, so must we. *Educational Leadership*, 64(6), 16-22.
- Orfield, G., & Lee, C. (2005). *Why segregation matters: Poverty and educational inequality*. The Civil Rights Project. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University. Retrieved from <http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu>