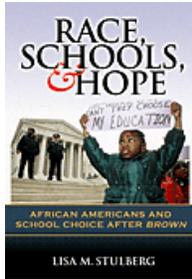# Professional Book Review

Stulberg, L. (2008). *Race, Schools, and Hope: African Americans and School Choice After Brown.* NY: Teachers College Press. 224 pp., ISBN: 978-0807748527 (pbk) $27.95.

Reviewed by Helen M. Kress, D'Youville College, U. S. A.

The foundation for Lisa Stulberg's timely book is that "hope is often a key theme of African American politics and philosophy" (p.25). The new president of the United States (Obama, 2009) calls for choosing "hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord" to renew the public's faith in the state as a guardian of "the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness." The new federal administration, it seems, is articulating that our government is a first defense against corporate greed, institutional waste, and "the silencing of dissent." Will this fresh federal leadership move toward redistributing power or recentralizing power? To what extent will economic interests dominate national interests in the next four years? How are public schools to be associated with such projects? What measures of school reform will indicate progress? How many school choices should or can a Eurocentric state offer the culturally diverse middle and working classes to help them realize the American Dream? What have African Americans said about and done with these school choices? These are questions stimulated by Stulberg's vivid historical and ethnographic investigation of late- 20th century schooling in America.

Stulberg carefully examines school choice as "a strategy for African Americans to retain hope in American schooling" (p. 2). School choice refers to "any reform effort that seeks to give parents more control over the school assignment of their children and/or more control over the kind of school that their children attend" (p. 4). More precisely, since *Brown v. Board*, when and how have African Americans sought more control over K-12 schools to further cultural self-determination? Stulberg chooses a set of four cases: public school community control initiatives in New York City, independent Black schools, school vouchers, and charter schools. These four cases have been the most "significant, but under-examined forms of African American school choice since *Brown*" (p.9). The "complexity of African American involvement in school choice" (p.157) is valuable to teacher educators, like me, who expect a disproportionately White pre-service teacher population to help improve public schools with their multicultural student populations. While I agree with the importance of the four cases Stulberg selects, I wonder how religion as a lens might have enriched the depth and breadth of these investigations. I teach in a heavily Catholic region of the U.S. I wonder why religious schools were not a distinct part of Stulberg's set, since African Americans have embraced, challenged, or modified aspects of Christianity to facilitate school reforms. Christian philosophies and practices from Europe contributed substantially to the American nation-building function of schools in every era. If religious schools had been included among Stulberg's case studies, this inclusion may have added to the historical context of how 19th century public schooling "helped create a secular state by taking

education largely out of the hands of the church" (p.17); policy debates persist today about the best relationship between church, culture, social class, and state.

Culture as the principal lens for this book's analysis draws my attention to how, like all but two neophyte teachers in my courses this semester, I am European American. Lisa Stulberg is as well, and her reflections illustrate a possible role for White teachers in interracial coalitions. She was the only White member of the founding group of West Oakland Charter School, the subject of her ethnographic work from 1999 to 2006. Issues of building cross-cultural trust (p. 12-13) and the school's founders' decision-making about multiracial participation (p.142-146) are described clearly. Limiting perhaps is her occasional use of depoliticized terms such as *mainstream* (p. 27 & 146) and *dominant* (p.38) instead of naming the group(s) responsible for prevailing views. Discomforting too is her use of the "integrationist-nationalist binary" (p. 26) despite her acknowledgment of its nuances and how "one may accept some tenets of integration and reject others" (p.29). Where this nationalist label is most obvious is in describing the independent Black school movement as rooted in Black nationalist goals. Consider instead how David Hilliard describes the Black Panthers' related legacy: "When people write about our party they reduce us to some cultural nationalist movement. This is not true. We were a revolutionary and political movement…[our] philosophy is to distribute the wealth of the United States to everyone." (as cited in Reed, 2003, p. 134). Despite these shortcomings, I welcome the insights available for exploration in this spirited book. Particularly helpful are the wealth of references to previous research, names of key players and organizations, and important terminology in the debates about school control. If they haven't read them by now, Stulberg's readers will learn where to find original work by, for example, Du Bois, Rustin, Madhubuti, and Shujaa. She synthesizes historical research and statistical trends to show how all cases of African American school choice are "a product of their time" (p. 158).

It is likely that Stulberg hopes this knowledge may help K-12 teachers and/or parent organizations impact contemporary policy changes more deeply, even though policies can appear to shift rapidly. Stulberg aptly ends the book with a warning about public schools and African Americans in the aftermath of the federal response to Hurricane Katrina, where charter schools have proliferated: "We need more than charter schools to resurrect public schooling in post-Katrina New Orleans" (p. 173). The newest research about New Orleans scrutinizes the facade of school choice when initially "hope lay in the small cluster of charter school and selective admission schools" (Miron, 2008, p. 241) but at present the "semiprivate system foretells the privatization of public education, as well as of other institutions, such as public housing" (Miron, 2008, p. 256). Indeed, the issue of choice is ultimately about control. As Stulberg's book candidly reveals, unless school control and "hope" are fused directly with the cultural survival of African Americans, the resulting school choices will be those of elite Whites.

References

Miron, L. (2008). The urban school crisis in New Orleans: Pre- and post-Katrina perspectives. *Journal of Students Placed at Risk, 13*(2/3), 238-258.

Obama, B. (2009). President Barack Obama's inaugural address. Retrieved January 22, 2009, from http://my.barackobama.page.community/post/stateupdates

Reed, I. (2003). *Blues city: A walk in Oakland.* New York: Crown.