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Marcus D. Pohlmann. *Opportunity Lost: Race and Poverty in the Memphis City Schools.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010. 288 pp. $42.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-638-4; $25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57233-716-9.

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As Goes Memphis: Examining the Intersection of Race and Poverty in American Schools

In the last few decades, many excellent authors have examined race and education in the United States, such as Alan Wieder in *Race and Education* (1997). Likewise, the literature examining socioeconomic class and education is growing. Since Ruby Payne's still somewhat controversial *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005) hundreds of authors have weighed in on the topic. Very few have fully explored the relationship between the two topics, race and poverty, though. Jonathan Kozol's body of work comes immediately to mind for a contemporary sociological view of the relationship.[1]While comparatively lacking in passion due to its historical approach, Marcus Pohlmann's *Opportunity Lost* sits alongside Kozol in presenting Memphis as case study for the nation. It serves equally in exploring the historical development of the relationship between race and poverty in the United States and as a call to arms for social justice and multicultural educators to stop exploring such topics in isolation.

The cadence for the call to arms comes in the first two chapters. The somewhat misleading title of the first chapter, "Memphis Schools in Context," is the beginning of a chapter that provides quite a bit of national context but not a lot of Memphis-specific data. It clarifies the links between race and poverty and poverty and education and sets forth the analytical framework of the book, asking what schooling has to do with the intersection of poverty and race. Pohlmann rightly points out that while, historically, the schools have been expected to counter inequality and help eliminate deprivation, "[T]he educational system provides only an illusion of equal opportunity. To expect it to lead the way toward more societal equality is little more than wishful thinking" (p. 22).

Chapter 2, "Memphis," provides the city-specific background missing in the first chapter. Here Pohlmann provides a brief history of the development of the city from Reconstruction through the 1990s, detailing how the racial divide affected the city's development, politically and economically, and how the political and economic climate, in turn, affected schooling. The chapter ends in the watershed year 1991, in which many black politicians won office and a political shift began to occur.

Chapters 3 and 4 shift the focus onto school-specific issues directly. Chapter 3, "Memphis City Schools," provides the history of the development of the district. Not overlooking the outcome of the Civil War and Reconstruction, Pohlmann traces the development of the city through Jim Crow and desegregation. School administration, finance, and school construction are all grounded in the details of national movements of the time. Here the author begins clarifying his use of Memphis as a national case study, pointing out that "Memphis has come to exhibit many characteristics of a postindustrial city." Notable among those characteristics is the financial burden poverty enacts on the city, as the "cost of providing badly needed services for the disproportionately poor population that has remained has in fact become a significant drain on their tax base, with educational services being the most expensive" (p. 37).

This national context also sets up the discussion in chapter 4, "School Desegregation," which begins with the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court and jumps to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. This brief legal history sets the stage for Pohlmann to trace the legal desegregation of the schools through the 1970s, noting the difference between de jure and de facto segregation. While de jure desegregation was a very gradual process throughout Tennessee, through the busing movements of the early 1970s, Pohlmann also explains how white flight led to resegregation but cautions that "the fact that city's public schools may have gotten progressively blacker does

not in and of itself portend negative educational consequences." Instead the author reminds that "[g]iven the correlations between family income and school progress, however, there is grounds for concern if the Memphis City Schools contain a much more economically disadvantaged student body" (p. 89).

These grounds for concern are validated as chapter 5, "Educational Results," shows what happened when Memphis "evolved into a city with a clearly established African American majority, with solid black control over all its major governmental entities, including its school board" (p. 91). Pohlmann uses a variety of input measures, including expenditures per pupil, students per teacher, teacher training, and teacher salaries, and output measures, including attendance, disciplinary action, failure rates, achievement, two sources of value-added scores, and competency exams, to compare Memphis City schools with surrounding Shelby County schools. The city schools have higher input measures but lower output measures, but "output gaps may have more to do with the city schools getting poorer than with them getting blacker." Pohlmann argues that such gaps "may have more to do with the level of preparation low-income students bring to school with them than with anything the city schools are or are not doing once they arrive" (p. 111).

Chapter 6, "Educational Alternatives," examines the implementation of a handful of specific reforms in Memphis schools. Early intervention programs, such as Head Start, are detailed, but the reader is once again reminded that "[t]he problems of poor people are not going to be solved by giving their children one year of preschool. The problem is jobs and housing. Let us not act as if one year of preschool will make these kids middle class" (p. 121). The second reform called for is increased caregiver involvement. Disseminating a variety of research on the tremendous influence of adult involvement on the first three years of development, Pohlmann looks at a handful of programs working to address this critical need. Next the author focuses on the school-based reforms of class size (they should be smaller), teacher development (there should be much more), time utilization (there should be fewer nonacademic matters in the school day), and promotion standards (they should be higher). District issues are also shared in the chapter: Pohlmann critically examines school district consolidation, reminding the reader that consolidation in other Tennessee cities (Nashville, Knoxville, and Chattanooga) "has not produced an educational nirvana" (p. 135). The mixed results of different district administrative models, such as decentralization and centralized intervention, are also examined. The chapter ends with a brief, somewhat critical, overview of many school-choice models: home schooling, public school options, magnet schools, privatization, charter schools, and vouchers.

Pohlmann's work is a detailed case study, using the past to explain the present in claiming Memphis schools to be indicative of the nation's as a whole. Rather than simply summarizing the arguments surrounding the linkages between race and poverty, in the conclusion, Pohlmann reminds the reader that "[h]ow we got to this point matters far less at this stage than where we go from here," outlining a long-range and admittedly costly method to resolve the issues that he has laid out for the reader (p. 160). The author argues that his "five r's" approach, if enacted in full, holds the promise "of a society that conforms much more closely to its own ideals, not to mention creating a more productive, peaceful, and secure single nation" (p. 161). These "r's" include: reasonable income–working to end poverty; reforms–improving K-12 schooling overall; resolve–maintaining the course even when it proves politically or socially inexpedient; responsibility–holding accountable all parties, including "taxpayers, educators, students, or those rearing students"; and respect–bringing all parties together to work together rather than shifting blame (p. 172).

Pohlmann provides extensive documentation throughout the book via lengthy and numerous endnotes, comprising over seventy-five pages at the book's end. These meaty notes, however, lead to the main misstep of the work, albeit one that is editorial, not authorial. Information in the notes is both referential and informational; if the reader does not begin flipping to the back of the book early on, there is quite a bit lost. In terms of formatting, footnotes, at least for the informational items, would have been beneficial. Overall, the book, as a whole, is a readable case study demonstrating the link between race and poverty. The organization of the book lends itself to an alternative use, though; the first and last chapters are of such high quality and national import that they can be read and used in isolation from the remainder of the work. To do so, however, provides the sheet music–dots and lines on paper–for the call to arms, but misses out on the center chapters–the story of Memphis–which is the sound, the music, where the true story lies.

Note

[1]. Themes of poverty and race are entwined throughout Kozol's books. However, three that stand out for showing the intersection of poverty and race are:

Jonathan Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1989); *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996); and *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York: Broadway Press, 2007).

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