BLACK AND WHITE IN SCHOOL

TRUST TENSION OR TOLERANCE?

JANET WARD SCHOFIELD

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Trust, Tension, or Tolerance?

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TEACHERS COLLEGE PRESS
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York and London

Published by Teachers College Press, 1234 Amsterdam Avenue
New York, NY 10027

A hardcover edition of this book was previously published by Praeger.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schofield, Janet Ward.
Black and white in school.

Bibliography: p. 235
Includes index.
1. School integration—United States—Case studies.
2. Interpersonal relations—Case studies. 3. Social interaction—United States—Case studies. I. Title.
LC214.2.S34 1989 370.19'342 89-4496

ISBN 8077-2982-5 (alk. paper)

Printed on acid-free paper

Manufactured in the United States of America

96 95 94 93 92 91 90 89 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To My Family
my parents, my husband, and my daughters
Alanya, Heather, and Emily
whose lives daily remind me of both the uniqueness and value of each individual and the fundamental importance of human bonds

PREFACE TO THE 1989 EDITION

The study on which this book is based was completed almost ten years ago. Since then, much has changed. The more conservative political and social climate now prevailing has been clearly reflected in national policies relating to school desegregation. Under the Reagan Administration, the Justice Department reversed its historical support for school desegregation, and federal funds earmarked to help finance desegregation efforts were cut back sharply. In addition, demographic trends in many large urban school districts in the 1980s have made it almost meaningless to speak of desegregation in the traditional sense of the word, since a very high proportion of the school-age population is now composed of minority group members (Farley 1984). Nonetheless, the *Brown* vs. *Board of Education* suit, which laid the basis for the desegregation of our nation's schools, continues to have an impact. For example, the proportion of black students attending virtually all black schools has been cut in half from about 64 percent in the late 1960s to about 33 percent in the 1980s. Thus, hundreds of thousands of students attend racially mixed schools, and many cities, towns, and states are still grappling with the issue of how to maximize the benefits of this experience while minimizing the potential problems.

Though attention to school desegregation and other issues connected with race relations more generally has diminished over the past ten to fifteen years, it isn't because the social and economic subordination of blacks in our society has suddenly been eliminated or because blacks and whites have finally found a way to live together in harmony. In fact, the Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life, a group whose distinguished bipartisan membership included former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, published a report in 1988 that concluded

> America is moving backward—not forward—in its effort to achieve the full participation of minority citizens in the life and prosperity of the nation. In education, employment, income, health, longevity and other basic measures of individual and social well-being, gaps persist—and in some cases are widening—between members of minority groups and the majority population. (cited in *The New York Times*, May 29, 1988)

Blacks still have markedly higher unemployment rates than whites, and their median family income remains below that of whites in both one and two parent households (Farley 1984). One need only mention Howard Beach, the New York neighborhood where a gang of white youths attacked three black men for racial reasons, or read reports of the recent growth of white supremacist groups to know that all is not well.

Even on college campuses, the breeding ground for much of the liberal social change in the late 1960s and early 1970s, racism is rampant. Almost 100 colleges and universities in this country have experienced racial incidents in the past year or so (Paull-Borja 1988). Some of these incidents have been quite violent, such as the torching of the first black fraternity house at the University of Mississippi, and cross burnings at the Citadel and the University of Alabama. Others, such as those involving racial insults and epithets at institutions as varied as Stanford, Oklahoma State, Dartmouth, American University, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, have generally been less violent but have nonetheless created considerable controversy and tension. Thus, the challenge of creating a society in which individuals can achieve their full potential and in which the legacy of economic inequality and social isolation between majority and minority groups does not rupture our social fabric remains crucial to the future of our country and the lives of its individual citizens. In fact, this issue is becoming even more pressing as the proportion of the population who are minority group members continues to rise substantially.

Nothing that has occurred in the fifteen years since I first started the study reported here has made me question the potential of school desegregation to help promote racial harmony and equality, although it has become increasingly clear that we cannot expect the schools single-handedly to solve problems that have longstanding historical, social, and economic causes. In fact, two developments in the past decade underscore the potential of desegregation to mitigate the problems plaguing our society. First, in 1984 the National Institute of Education commissioned seven well respected scholars of varying political stances to perform a meta-analysis (a statistical aggregation of the results of previous empirical studies) of the existing research on school desegregation's impact on black students' achievement (Cook et al. 1984). The overall conclusion stemming from this major project was that desegregation does indeed improve black achievement. Specifically, it appears to have a modest positive impact on black stu-

dents' reading abilities, though not influencing mathematics achievement to a noticeable extent. Although proponents of desegregation have long claimed that positive academic outcomes for minority students were likely and could cite studies to back this contention, the set of 1984 meta-analyses provides more systematic and complete evidence for this claim than was previously available. Furthermore, although there is less research on this topic, the broad consensus among those who have reviewed the available literature is that desegregation does not harm the academic achievement of whites, as opponents of the policy have claimed it would (St. John 1975; Schofield 1988; Weinberg 1970).

A second development also reinforces the importance of school desegregation. Evidence is beginning to accumulate that school desegregation may help break a cycle of racial isolation in which both minority and majority group members, unused to mutual contact, avoid each other even though this limits their occupational, social, and residential choices. For example, two studies suggest that increasing levels of school desegregation are related to decreasing amounts of residential segregation (Pearce 1980; Pearce, Crain, and Farley 1984). At the individual rather than community level, there is evidence that blacks who attended desegregated schools are more likely to live in integrated neighborhoods and to have white social contacts later in life (Crain 1984; Crain and Weisman 1972). In a quite different area, employment, there is also evidence that school desegregation breaks down intergroup barriers. For example, Braddock, Crain, and McPartland (1984) summarize the results of several national surveys and conclude that black graduates of desegregated schools are more likely to work in desegregated environments than peers who attended segregated schools. One of the factors that may account for this outcome is that blacks who attend desegregated schools will most likely have more desegregated social networks than those attending predominantly black schools. Recent work by Braddock and McPartland (1987) demonstrates that blacks who use such desegregated networks in their job searches end up in jobs yielding a higher income and having a higher percentage of white co-workers than blacks who either use segregated networks or no social networks in their job searches.

There is little comparable research on the long-term impact of desegregation on whites. However, it seems reasonable to expect a parallel increase in intergroup contact later in life. Indeed, at least one study has demonstrated that the racial composition of white

students' high schools and colleges influences the likelihood that they will work in a desegregated setting later in life (Braddock, McPartland, and Trent 1984).

Research connecting desegregated schooling with important outcomes later in life is particularly gratifying to me because it helps to provide a data-based answer to those colleagues who have asked me during the past fifteen years, "Why don't you study something important, like academic achievement, instead of focusing on social relationships?" While I do not deny the crucial importance of academic achievement in creating a situation in which minority group members can take advantage of opportunities, it has always seemed to me that the social skills and relationships that can develop in desegregated schools are of considerably more importance than is typically recognized by researchers and educators.

This belief undoubtedly has some of its roots in my experiences during a year in the late 1960s when I taught at a black college and saw able black colleagues whose careers in the wider society had been blocked by discrimination. Even more telling to me was the plight of some undergraduates I knew who could not bring themselves to take advantage of the career opportunities beginning to open up to them outside the black community because of a fear of the unknown—that is, of desegregated social environments. This belief was further strengthened by the work of Jencks et al. (1972) which demonstrated that academic achievement does not have the kind of overwhelming impact on later occupational success that might justify making it the exclusive focus of most research on the outcomes of desegregated schooling. Although Jencks et al. may have overstated their case, as critics have charged, recent work on the long-term social and occupational outcomes of desegregation does highlight the need to recognize that schools do more than teach academic subject matter. As a social environment in which individuals spend nearly one-third of their waking hours for a significant portion of their lives, schools have a profound potential for shaping individuals and their social networks as the study reported in this book points out.

I have argued above that achieving increased equality and harmony between whites and blacks remains an important challenge which must be faced in the 1990s. I have also argued that interracial schooling is one strategy that can contribute to attaining these goals. However, the question remains whether a book originally written in the early 1980s based on research done in the late 1970s is likely to be

useful in understanding the realities of interracial schooling in the 1990s, or whether circumstances have changed so much that such a study is primarily of historical interest. I firmly believe that this book still speaks to the current situation in many interracial schools. The reason is relatively straightforward. The core chapters in the book deal with such issues as the impact on peer relations of previous racial isolation and group differences in socio-economic status and academic achievement. High levels of residential segregation and the continued existence of marked disparities between blacks and whites in socio-economic status and academic achievement are still facts of life in the U.S. Thus, they still present a challenge to students and teachers in desegregated schools. Other core chapters examine the impact of the students' particular developmental stage on the nature of their relationships, both with those who share their own gender or race and with those who do not. It seems reasonable to assert that the developmental issues faced by students as they make the transition into their early teen years have not changed fundamentally in the last decade, in spite of some changes in the social context in which they occur.

One question I am often asked by those who have read the 1982 edition of this book is, "What is the school you studied like now?" This question is prompted by the rapid and substantial changes which occurred there, detailed in Chapter 7. The school opened in 1975 as a model of academic excellence and carefully planned integration. By 1982, when this book was first published, the school was seriously overcrowded and in danger of being categorized as segregated according to state guidelines because the proportion of black students was much higher in the school than in the school district.

To answer this question fully would require another intensive and time-consuming study. I have not undertaken such a study for a variety of reasons, one of the most important being the current lack of funding for desegregation research. However, in preparation for the republication of this book I did a brief "mini-study" of the school focusing primarily on the kinds of issues discussed in Chapter 7. Information on many of these topics was available from statistics and reports published by the School Board, written materials gathered at the school, and from a review of local newspaper coverage of the school and the district during the past ten years. This information was supplemented by contact with individuals at the Board of Education and interviews with the school's principal as well as with current

students and the parents of such students. I was delighted to discover that almost all of the sixth grade teachers who had been kind enough to allow me to observe extensively in their classes (see Table 1, p. 31) were still at the school, as were a substantial number of the seventh and eighth grade teachers who had participated in the initial study. Many of these individuals were gracious enough to take time from their work to talk with me about the school's recent history; they proved to be invaluable resources. Since I believe that the school's current state is best understood as part of its continuing evolution, I have not included the material from my admittedly brief mini-study in this Preface. Rather, it has been placed at the end of Chapter 7 under the heading "Going on Fifteen: Wexler Revisited."

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The placement of these acknowledgments near the beginning of this book is most appropriate since it symbolizes the important role that others have played in making the book possible. Chief among these individuals is H. Andrew Sagar, who, over the course of several years while a graduate student in social psychology at the University of Pittsburgh, was of invaluable help in virtually every stage of the research from conducting observations and interviews to performing statistical analyses and synthesizing and interpreting the data. Also essential to many phases of this research over more than two years was Elaine McGivern, then a graduate student in sociology, whose hard work, interpersonal skills, and research acumen made a major contribution to this project. The participation of a number of other graduate students, including Donna Durant, Barbara Hall, Chuck Hopkins, Sandra Leath, and David Schaeffer, also enriched the study in a variety of ways.

An intensive research project such as the one reported here generates a vast amount of data to be typed, indexed, and analyzed. The mammoth job of transcribing literally thousands of pages of dictated notes and taped interviews fell primarily on the capable shoulders of Peter Rubinsky and Karen Ginley. I am sincerely grateful to both of them for the dedication, patience, intelligence, and good humor with which they approached this Herculean task. Others who made a major contribution to this work in its later stages were Nancy Zak, Debbie Connell, and Darlene Luppino-Grant all of whom approached this work with superb skills, initiative, and a sense of professionalism for which I am most grateful.

A number of undergraduates at the University of Pittsburgh also contributed to this project by capably assisting in analysis of the interview data. They are Bob Bittel, Paul Carosi, Monica Kreuger, Bill Seidel, Karen Snider, and Kim Strayer. Other graduate and undergraduate students, including Yvette Cook, Sue Gorna, Laurie Ney, Jim Rodgers, Nancy Short, and Leslie Steele, assisted in the research in various ways too numerous to mention. Special thanks go to Debbie Guydish for applying her administrative and accounting

skills so effectively and thus relieving me of many time-consuming tasks.

The research reported here was funded by the Desegregation Studies Unit at the National Institute of Education, and I would like to express my appreciation to Ray Rist and Ron Henderson, who served as head of that unit at different stages of the project, for their encouragement and support, financial and otherwise. Thanks also go to a number of my colleagues and students at the Learning Research and Development Center and in the Psychology Department at the University of Pittsburgh for their valuable comments on draft chapters of this manuscript and to Sarah Ward for her editorial assistance.

The research on which the book is based would not have been possible without the very generous cooperation of those at Wexler Middle School as well as of the administrative staff at the Waterford Board of Education. I thank Wexler's students and staff for their time, their willingness to share their thoughts and observations, and for the courage they showed in allowing us to observe them day in and day out in the best and worst of conditions. Only concern about maintaining the confidentiality of data keeps me from singling out by name for particular thanks those administrators, teachers, and students who made a special contribution to this research by serving on interview panels or participating in the observational phases of the study.

A project that spans six or seven years, as has the research for and the writing of this book, and that makes intense demands on one's time, emotions, and intellect cannot help but profoundly affect one's development as an individual. The people I have met, the experiences I had as an observer at Wexler, the things I read, and the reflection involved in the preparation of this volume have greatly enriched my life. Thus I would like to thank my parents, who, by providing a warm and supportive home environment that valued intellectual endeavors, and financial support throughout my undergraduate and graduate years, set the stage for my undertaking such a project. So fundamental that it hardly needs mention but much too important to omit is my gratitude to my husband, Douglas, for his confidence in my abilities, his encouragement of my work, and his willingness to make those adjustments and compromises inevitable in a two-career family. All of these things helped make possible

the undertaking and completion of this work, which I hope the reader will find both enlightening and provocative.

Small portions of the text have appeared previously in the three books listed below. This material is reprinted by permission of the publishers concerned.

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CONTENTS

1

WEXLER MIDDLE SCHOOL: PROMISE AND PROBLEMS

Wexler Middle School opened amid great fanfare and high hopes.* The new school was touted as a model of both high-quality education and thoroughgoing integration. Indeed, the major local newspaper rhapsodized:

> If anything, Wexler may be too good. . . . That is, it could skim off the cream and make more difficult later plans to establish [middle] schools. . . . But the administration is putting its best foot forward and worrying later about future successes.

*Pseudonyms are used throughout this book in place of actual proper names in order to provide confidentiality. For the same reason, occasional changes have been made in the names of specific programs or positions within the school when it was possible to do this without creating confusion about their nature. Finally, in a very few instances, such as the quotations from newspaper articles, complete source information has not been provided because it could compromise the other efforts made to insure confidentiality.

The research on which this book is based was funded by the National Institute of Education (NIE) under contract no. 400-76-0011. Some of the other expenses related to the preparation of the book were funded by grant number MH31602-01 from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and by the Learning Research and Development Center of the University of Pittsburgh, which is supported in part by funds from NIE. However, all opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author, and no endorsement of the ideas by NIE or NIMH is implied or intended.