The Problems of Black Education

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This paper argues that schools, the primary instrument of cultural assimilation in the society, have failed to meet the needs of most minorities but particularly urban black students in the United States. The "committed school" is suggested as a partial solution, but the author warns that the underlying issue is racism, a barrier which must be eliminated before substantial progress can be made in minority education.

Cet article soutient que l'école, qui est l'outil le plus inportant dans le processus social d'assimiliation culturelle, n'a pas réussi à répondre aux besoins de la plupart des minorités, plus particulièrement celle des jeunes Noirs des villes américaines. L'"école engagée" est envisagée ici comme solution partielle, mais l'auteur insiste sur le fait que le fond du problème est le racisme, et que cette barrière doit être éliminée avant que des progrès notables soient réalisés dans l'éducation des minorités.

Introduction

In the early 1800's Horace Mann wrote that education would become "the great equalizer of the condition of men — the balance wheel of the social machinery." The public schools have historically and traditionally been responsible for educating, socializing, and making all youth functional members of society, a process which has frequently meant change. As the principal agents of change in our society, schools have been the primary instruments of cultural assimilation.

But for black students, urban schools have failed. They have produced hundreds of thousands of functional illiterates, unable to compete for increasingly technical jobs and condemned to a life of poverty. Urban black youths leave school lacking competence in the most elementary tools of modern culture, abysmally unprepared to cope with the demands of modern life. In New York, a recent newsletter from the New York Urban League quoted some discouraging statistics for black youth in that city: Over 69% of the black youth in one district were unemployed, and 33% of all blacks in the city had income levels at or below the poverty level. Moreover, more than 50% of New York's minority youth drop out of high school. While blacks make up 75% of the student population of "deteriorating" city schools, 72% do not complete high school (*New York Urban League Newsletter*, 1985, p.1).

Recognizing the profound implication of this failure for human beings and for social stability, we should be determined to find out what can be done to raise the overall academic level of black students, as was the aim of the Alliance of

Black School Educators (1984). Unwilling to accept that urban public schools cannot provide black students a quality education, I will in the following pages attribute their failure to the problems of perceived inferiority and the motivation of black youth within the structure of urban school systems.

The Perception of Inferiority

Although the educational plight of black youngsters has traditionally been linked to the southern experience, black children in all areas of the United States experience low academic achievement. The large urban communities, however, exhibit the most obvious symptoms — low academic achievement, the reluctance of teachers to accept urban assignments, and the emergence of issues such as corporal punishment and community control (Green, 1969; Rosenholtz, 1985).

Low achievement is well documented. In reading achievement, Kerner (1969) found that black students in the metropolitan northeast were, on average, 1.6 grades behind the national level, and by the twelfth grade, they were 3.3 grades behind. There is little reason to suspect that figures would differ significantly today.

Since many black children are at an economic disadvantage, it is especially important that they gain the skills to function effectively in a highly literate society. We cannot, however, use environmental deprivation as an excuse not to provide black children with quality education. Rather, it should be used as the major reason for providing black youth with the best education possible (Cohen, 1969; Hawley, 1983).

The goal of providing all children with the opportunity to fulfill their potential will not be met by concentrating only on the obstacles. Successful intervention must be both sustained and multifaceted. Compensatory education programs focusing only on "cultural deprivation," will not help the child who is hungry (Gross, 1983, p.44). Neither will ill-timed, poorly sustained efforts carried out by individuals unaware of the complexity of their task (Eichenwald & Fry, 1969).

Compensatory education programs have been accompanied by a wave of training programs for teachers of disadvantaged youth. Most of these training programs were designed in response to the demands of black parents and frustrated school officials who discovered that regular training programs did not adequately prepare teachers to teach urban youth. Recent findings indicate a need for multiculturally trained teachers, and also that such graduates are highly successful in the job market and tend to work where their skills are most needed (Mahan, 1982, p.15).

Children need to feel that there is a partnership between school and community if they are to develop a sense of self-worth. They need to know that their school is committed to their success and future. Black parents and community members have been convinced that only through community control of the schools will these educational benefits accrue to their children (Young, 1969). According to Wilcox (1969), urban communities are asking for: a) control over hiring, firing, training and programming of school staff; b) control over site selection and naming of schools; c) control over expenditure of local, state and federal funds; control

over design and construction of schools. Hamilton (1969) notes that many black people are demanding more black principals in predominately black schools, to serve as role models. There is a demand to have the schools recognize black heroes with national holidays. There is concern for emphasizing group solidarity and pride, and there is a very serious question about whether a largely white, middle-class ethos can perform this function (p.678).

A growing number of blacks are insisting that the schools begin to reflect this new concern. It is not sufficient to give an accurate historical picture of the ethnic groups only to minority children. *All* Americans must have this exposure in the city, the suburbs, the local schools (Hamilton, 1969, p.669; Brantlinger, 1985, p.389).

Urban parents have long been concerned with the quality of education their children receive. In Harlem, there have been committees for better schools going back to the 1930s (Clark, 1965). The fact that the educational system has been middle class oriented and that teachers have helped to fulfill the prophecy of failure for black and poor youth has had a great bearing on their dropout rates (Vintner & Sarri, 1965). Youngsters growing up in depressed neighbourhoods become increasingly aware of an affluent society which exists out of reach for them. Frustrated and bored by schools, and curricula devoid of relevance, black youngsters often drop out.

Nevertheless, there is a deep and abiding faith in black communities that, in the face of all obstacles, a decent education can be obtained if the right decisions are made. Blacks are weary of being presented new packages that do not reflect the realities of life in their communities, the variety of their cultural heritage, or the complexity of upward mobility (Manning, 1969; Brantlinger, 1985).

Motivating Black Youth

Academically motivating urban black youth and modifying negative social practices is a persistent challenge to teachers and school administrators (Hood, 1973, p.362; Olion, 1983, p.52). Hood believes that many school personnel tend to accept the sociological conclusions which attribute black underachievement primarily to "social factors." Both Hood and Olion further suggest that the teaching of social realities in the public school and the elimination of teacher stereotypes regarding the "culturally deprived," may produce positive results in the black motivational process.

Through bitter experience, blacks have learned that equality of opportunity does not necessarily mean equality of treatment. While schools and researchers have blamed the victims for their failure to achieve, the victims have simply turned around and said "achieve for what?" Hood believes that school officials cannot delude themselves into believing that students are not aware of the realities of inequality.

Coles (1972) refers to the specific administrative and teaching styles that influence motivation and achievement in black students. Coles describes three

general types of schools and their teachers, whose educational and behavioral philosophies have either positive or negative effects upon student motivation. The "ghetto school" presents an atmosphere of hopelessness by administrators, teachers and students. Often the students see themselves as heirs to their parents' lives and do not expect to graduate from high school, much less college.

The second type of school is the racially mixed school where little attention is given to the needs of minority students. Too many of the teachers lack confidence in their ability to reach and make changes in the lives of these students. Most promising is the third type, the "committed school." Coles defines committed schools as those committed to the proposition that children from any neighbourhood can learn far more than they ordinarily do. Teachers expect much from students, and instead of talking about how "far the students have to go," they confront what they have to accomplish now, without pitying, coddling or delaying. Today, "effective schools" make the difference in student achievement by concentrating on raising academic performance for minority students (Rosenholtz, 1985, p. 352).

There is a crucial understanding which is necessary before any school or teacher can become "committed." It must be clearly understood that black students in the United States have no culture of poverty that differentiates them from other students. Historical black experience in America has been one of disenfranchisement. But blacks today share the same dominant values of getting a good education, getting a good job, supporting one's family, and taking care of one's property, that cross all ethnic lines in the United States.

Blacks and other ethnic groups have some specific cultural expressions, musical styles, soul food, etcetera, but these in no way diminish their mainstream values. In light of this, it is easily seen how, despite fiery rhetoric, only a minority of blacks will join a revolutionary cause. What non-black researchers often fail to grasp is that the behavior of blacks in relation to institutional practices is related to the condition of blacks in the United States. Situational pressures may influence individuals at a given moment more than their value systems do. The man who has been honest all his life may steal when he is hungry (Hood, 1973).

During adolescent years the peer group often exerts greater influence on a youth than does his family. The emphasis upon being rather than becoming is directly related to the destruction of the connectedness of life in modern America. The general climate of violence and disrespect for the individual, so pervasive in the United States, suggests that schools, as socializing institutions, must impart the importance of human values, and the development of a healthy social consciousness. Students must learn to see themselves in positions of accountability and respect in relation to themselves, and all other members of society.

Hood believes that schools can initiate the process of becoming committed by becoming centres dedicated to the education of citizens, rather than "holding places." She makes the following suggestions for action that can be taken by the schools:

1) developing a pervasive administrative policy of commitment to changes in expectations of the students academically and socially;
2) eliminating all stereotypes associated with the "culturally deprived" student;
3) teaching social realities;
4) structuring the content of course work to emphasize the connectedness of life and provide opportunities for meaningful interaction of all age groups;
5) academic and technical skill building must take place;
6) developing social consciousness and pride through allowing credit for service to the school;
7) teaching ethnic pride by consciously relating the lives and works of achieving blacks to the students own possibilities.

If Hood's suggestions were put into practice, the school system would produce many more "socially minded and socially aware" citizens who would have a positive impact on society. But these suggestions cannot be practiced until more schools are converted to committed schools. Only teachers who function as "committed educators" should be permitted to remain in this particular setting. However well qualified otherwise, their misconceptions of minority group needs and goals may have negative effects on students. By teaching all students about the accomplishments of blacks and erasing some of the misconceptions of black values, committed schools will produce better educated citizens, who will become committed police, teachers, government officials, etc.

Summary

The underlying theme of this paper is that urban schools are failing in what has always been regarded as one of their primary tasks, to serve as the great equalizer of the educational and social conditions of young people. The system has failed to meet the needs of all American minorities, but perhaps most severely Black Americans. A major reason for this failure is that the system reflects the biases that permeate the broader society. The educational system has not established strategies nor made a major commitment to eradicate the various forms of discrimination that negatively affect the education of American minorities. A strong white middle-class bias is reflected in curriculum and in the attitudes of teachers and systems long insensitive to the needs of minorities. Many authors have attempted to substantiate beliefs which partly explain why urban educational institutions are in such a deplorable state. Among them are the following:

a) Educational innovators have not given adequate attention to the environmental context from which urban youngsters come.
b) Teacher training programs, not discussed here, but a significant factor in the problem of black education today, remain unchanged and seemingly unresponsive to the needs of blacks and urban students. There is a critical need for imaginative in-service and pre-service programs for teachers, that are in the mainstream of the total training process.
c) New strategies must be found to decentralize large urban school systems and to revert control over educational decisions to the community.

d) Social researchers have not met their full responsibility in attempting to seek answers to the problems facing the education of black students.

These problems must be addressed if urban educational institutions are going to survive. Deprivation should no longer be used as an excuse for not providing strong, adequate education programs for black youth. Racism is the barrier preventing youngsters from learning and performing well in educational settings. It is the duty of all educators, and particularly professional organizations such as the National Committee to Support the Public Schools and the National Education Association, to speak out and eliminate these barriers.

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