Public School Policy and Minority Students

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American school policy toward adolescents has traditionally operated through sanctions, tracking and leveling, economics, power, sorting and selection, and dependency. Policies related to these areas are applied to all students; however, they have a negative impact on minority students. Evidence suggests that these policies primarily meet organizational needs and those of advantaged students. Since the minority student population is largely composed of disadvantaged students, there is the constant opportunity for conflict with the organization's value structure. Minority students who choose to rebel receive sanctions; they are required to conform or to drop out of school. Those who conform are given rewards distinctly different from their advantaged peers. These rewards encourage a sense of maintained dependency. School organizations that attempt to alter traditional policies are frequently met with resistance by administrators and faculty members who work to ensure the perpetuation of the school's ethos. School policy needs to be driven by a philosophy of equality that protects all students from academic, cultural, economic, and financial exploitation. Failure on the part of school organizations to provide such safeguards should result in the use of receivership as a sanction for continued discrimination against minority students.

Aux Etats-Unis, les politiques traditionnelles de sanctions, de sélection et de regroupement d'étudiants sont élaborées en fonction de besoins organisationnels et favorisant la majorité. Les élèves issus des milieux minoritaires qui contestent le système se trouvent dans l'alternative d'encourir des sanctions ou d'abandonner leurs études. Ceux qui se conforment reçoivent des récompenses qui ne sont pourtant pas celles de leurs pairs favorisés. Ainsi, le système crée et nourrit l'état de dépendance. L'administration et le personnel enseignant des écoles voient d'un mauvais oeil les efforts des organisations scolaires qui tentent de changer les politiques traditionnelles; on veut maintenir le *statu quo*. Les politiques scolaires doivent être inspirées par une philosophie de l'égalité, protégeant l'étudiant contre toute exploitation qu'elle soit de nature culturelle, économique, intellectuelle ou financière. Dans la mesure où les écoles ne savent pas protéger les minorités contre la discrimination, elles manquent à un aspect important de leur mandat.

Traditionally, American public schools have been concerned with developing students' cognitive abilities and citizenship skills. In recent years, this focus has changed to include activities designed to assist students with social and emotional needs. The change in function and role have not affected organizational policies that dictate the relationship of the school to the student; these remain substantially the same (Lipham, Rankin, & Hoeh, 1985). School policies have generally favored advantaged students and are designed around sanctions, tracking and leveling, economics, power, sorting and selection, and dependency. These policies affect all students, especially minorities. As a result, it is important that educators examine educational policy as it relates to minority students. This paper examines

how formal and informal school policies exacerbate alienation and intensify social stratification.

School sanctions and minority students. Many researchers have maintained that school policies toward minority students are designed to control behavior and maintain class distinctions (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). These policies are viewed as being generated out of a power struggle among administrators, teachers, and students (Tjosvold, 1978). It has been argued that the conflict between these three groups has resulted in an alliance between teachers and administrators, with administrators enfranchising the teacher's right to exercise authority over minority adolescents through the extensive use of sanctions (Corwin, 1967). If this argument is correct, many teachers and administrators may respond to students by expanding the range of sanctions (Rafky, 1979), applying them more often to minority students than to advantaged students (Felice, 1981). The development of sanctions fails to take into account the student's culture, interest, likes, dislikes, or attitudes toward school policies (Dillon & Grout, 1976). They are developed primarily to meet organizational needs (Maynard, 1977), then the needs of the advantaged student, and finally, the minority student's needs (Michelson, 1981).

School policies of segregation. The segregation of minority students from their more advantaged peers is subtle and is initiated at the onset of the minority child's education. At the initiation stage, minority children are more equal to advantaged students than at any other time during their school years (Holman, 1985). The distance between socioeconomic groups increases, in part, because of the school's low commitment to the minority student. Thus, the minority student is more likely to be suspended or placed in special attention classes, to fail to receive teacher attention (Cardenas & First, 1985). These discriminatory efforts create a strong feeling of powerlessness (Long, 1978). Therefore, the minority student is more likely to operate with low self esteem and accept exploitation in the form of poor education, poor health care, economic and sexual exploitation, and an expectation of poverty (Carnegie Corporation, 1984). Education is often presented to the minority student as an important opportunity to eliminate this cycle; however, educational opportunities are limited to those who conform to the school's cultural values. Yet, those who conform still face political, social, and economic discrimination (Scott, 1986). Thus, the educational process may fail to meet the minority student's needs.

The needs of the minority population are defined in terms of the middle class community, consumer society, and corporate organizations (Bowles & Gintes, 1989). White, upper, and middle class students are tracked into college bound programs and encouraged to challenge teachers, while minority students are directed toward blue collar careers, and taught to take orders meekly. The best roles and training are reserved for advantaged students. These students are given the best courses and teachers, and encouraged to apply to the best colleges. There is a middle group of students who come from backgrounds that provide them with a higher standard of living. Yet this standard of living is distant enough to maintain class stratification. These students and their parents are allowed to

participate, encouraged to attend large state universities, but seldom selected for governing roles. They learn game strategies as they are dictated by the governing agencies. Failure to use these strategies results in social and economic injury.

Minority students, when initiated into the formal learning process, are automatically selected for lower societal functions. Some of these students adroitly accept societal rules. They change speech patterns and mannerisms, and accept the dominant class's values. As a result, they are offered membership in the second group. Those who remain adopt a passive attitude to survive (Apple, 1982). Passive behavior is often viewed as a signal that minority students accept their role. Thus the school can claim that an equal education is offered to all students and it is the student who rejects the opportunity.

These policies toward minority students are demonstrated by the school's failure to provide meaningful work and academic skills; they also create a sense of maintained dependence (Carnegie Foundation, 1979). Organizational claims of equal education refer to equality of quantity rather than equality of quality (Adler, 1982). Available data indicate little disparity between black and white participation in foreign languages, mathematics, and natural sciences (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1985), but they neglect to indicate course levels and socioeconomic status. Thus, the data do not indicate the segregating effects of tracking or leveling (Goodlad, 1984). Schools mask tracking and leveling policies by offering free access to most courses. Minority students quickly learn that inadequate teaching materials, inappropriate teaching styles, and opportunities for social embarrassment are tracking criteria. To many minority students, algebra, foreign languages, physics, and Western literature are meant for the economically advantaged (Fantini, 1986).

This environment alienates the minority student (Coleman, 1978). Ironically, schools give the appearance of not wanting to alienate, yet their actions, which are often designed to assist young people, create a worse environment. For example, tracking and leveling are used as educational tools to assist teachers in efficiently instructing students of various abilities. In effect, this policy segregates minority students from advantaged students and promotes class distinction. This form of segregation is subtle, in that schools appear to be integrated and class offerings are considered to be open. However, counseling by teachers, counselors, and administrators often directs minority students to segregate themselves voluntarily through their curricular and activity choices (Polk, 1984).

School policy and the economy. The policy of segregation flows from the school's mandate to act as society's reproductive agent (Apple, 1982). As the reproductive agent, the school and economic sector have become allies to instill corporate values and produce workers (Larkin, 1979). Thus, the education that students receive is related to corporate needs. These needs contribute to the economic exploitation of minority students for the benefit of business institutions (Michelson, 1981).

Work/study programs, in particular, exploit the low socioeconomic status of the minority student. Policies which encourage work/study are fostered for two

reasons: potential discipline problems are eliminated, and it serves as a means of allowing the community's economic interests to hire inexpensive labor. The school derives benefits from this policy because of its potential use as a sanction to deprive minority students of financial reward. The economic sector benefits because adolescents are paid a minimum wage; as part time employees, they are not covered by health or related insurances. Thus, the employer is assured of an endless supply of inexpensive labor.

The pattern of encouraging minority youth to become part-time students takes advantage of their financial plight (Sizer, 1984). As a result, schooling ceases to be important; many minority students view school as irrelevant in terms of the curriculum, see teachers as non-caring, and discipline as arbitrary and restrictive (Poole & Low, 1982). These conditions have contributed to the consistently high minority student dropout rate (Hamilton, 1986) which may be higher than reported since numbers reported by local districts to state agencies are deflated (Morrow, 1986) because state reimbursement is frequently tied to student attendance.

Ironically, minority students who drop out are blamed, along with their environment, for not taking advantage of educational opportunities. Educators traditionally blame the victim by citing the dropout's family environment, socioeconomic status, poor role models, and low aspirations as the reasons for dropping out of school (Rumberger, 1983). System inadequacies are ignored as the school refuses to acknowledge responsibility for failed programs, poor teaching, and inadequate leadership.

School structure and the use of power. The system's inadequacies are hidden within the structure of the school's closed climate. This climate tolerates little variance from the norm and deals harshly with those who challenge its culture and code (Hartley & Hoy, 1972). There is little dissent because of the informal organizational policy requiring unity of thought and expression (Shearin, 1982). The closed climate is typified by a standardized curriculum that requires learners to adjust (Fantini, 1986); impersonal relationships with teachers (Hamilton, 1986); endorsement of racial, sexual, and socioeconomic myths (Sizer, 1984); passive learning; and use of sanctions (Alschuler, 1984; Maynard, 1977; Rafalides & Hoy, 1971).

Schools use three forms of power — coercive, remunerative, and normative to control adolescent behavior (Lipham et al, 1985). Among adolescents, coercive and remunerative power are directed toward minority students. Mandatory attendance policies are an example of coercive power which primarily affects the minority student. As a result, the public school is able to undercut the minority student's basic freedoms in the interests of those who are in control (Arons & Lawrence, 1982). The restriction of freedom is frequently seen in the limited options minorities have for selecting a school. In general, school attendance is determined by geographical location. The poorer the student, the less likely that student's parents can select a school through geographical relocation, whereas advantaged families often use schools as a major criteria in deciding where to live (Milton & Friedman, 1979). The use of renumerative power also discriminates against the minority

student since the schools are designed around middle and upper class values (Fine, 1986). The school disseminates grades, gives course credit, and establishes graduation criteria that meet the needs of the advantaged, not the minority student.

Normative power is used as a reinforcing agent with advantaged students by distributing rewards to those who uphold organizational values. Rewards take the form of letters, academic and athletic recognition, public announcements, selection as prom king or queen, and selection to help the teacher grade, erase boards, carry books, or to help the custodian. These rewards are distributed by economic status with lesser rewards given to the minority student. Thus, one can expect to find academic awards which include membership in the honor society, honor roll, scholarships, and service pins given to advantaged students, while minority students are allowed to help the custodian carry boxes, clean the teacher's boards, and cut grass. The minority student has been taught to give a greater value to these lower class awards because they replace the boredom of the academic environment. The minority student's interaction in the reward activity takes the form of meaningless service (Ornstein, 1981).

Advantaged students receive their awards at ceremonial functions as a means of phasing in social class leadership. These ceremonial functions use the vestiges of the reward system such as robes, stoles, awards, and community attendance. This use of normative power creates an environment in which minority youth are forced to acknowledge the difference in worth between their awards and the awards given their more advantaged peers. As a result, minority students turn toward non-social activities for their rewards (Kulka, Kahle, and Klingel, 1982).

The school as a selection and sorting agent. Non-social activities are often overt expressions of alienation (Wynne, 1978). Within the school, alienated behavior is associated with minority students and often results in suspension and lower grades (Moyer & Motta, 1982). Thus the system sorts and selects by creating an environment where the risk of becoming alienated is great. Those who do not choose the system's values become alienated and express those values in their behavior. The system is then free to sort publicly because the minority youth freely choose not to be associated with the school and society's value structure (Massialas, 1969). Schools sort and select in other ways. Minority students who have athletic ability are sorted onto the playing fields and gymnasiums to provide the system with free entertainment and give the school organization economic benefit. These students are frequently disregarded once they no longer serve this function.

Teachers assist in the sorting process by selecting students who challenge, but are quick to retreat, who apologize and accept responsibility. This sorting process takes the form of questions, feedback, stroking, and special privileges. Advantaged students assist the teacher for extra credit, they receive hints about the upcoming exam, and they can count on extra subjective points on final grades. Minority students have a difficult time earning these privileges.

It is difficult for the minority student to challenge these practices successfully. Even if a challenge were successful, school district policy is seldom replicated at the building level because of the decentralized nature of the school organization. Building principals are free to choose those policies they feel are important to implement. Given the manner in which school districts operate, it is rare to find a superintendent observing to see if school board policy is enforced. Checking occurs on an informal basis through the complaints of parents and students. These complaints are often ignored through the use of intimidation, stalling, patronizing, and other strategies. School administrators use these strategies to prevent dissent from reaching the policy-making level. Thus, the implementation of policy designed to reduce discriminatory practices frequently does not occur. Policy implementation if it does occur, does so on an individual basis.

This strategy is especially effective against the minority student. Minorities have been shown to be more alienated and as a result less likely to complain or seek redress (Calabrese, Miller & Dooley, 1987). The minority students are left with two options — passively remain or drop out; private education is not an option (Everhart, 1982).

The school policy of maintained dependence. The strategy to discriminate against the minority is masked by the school organization's operation of programs outwardly designed to assist them. There is evidence, however, that these programs are designed to fail as a means of maintaining a consistent flow of federal and state funding. This funding is used to support adult positions and other school uses not always directed toward the delivery of services to the target population (Woodson, 1982). In effect, minority students are the victims of economic exploitation through an informal policy of maintained dependency.

The organizational policy of instilling and maintaining a sense of dependency begins in grade school, is maintained through high school, and acts as the triggering mechanism for sustained dependence. Dependency policies take several forms — free lunch programs; inflated grades in exchange for good behavior; inflated grades in exchange for participation in the sports program; teaching formats that do not require the learner to think. The inference is clear; those in power are taught the traits and skills to assume power, those who have not been empowered are taught the skills to serve those in power. Thus, minority students are programmed to believe that they are not capable of participation in difficult courses, that they must have hands on, relevant courses that do not challenge their intellect, and that they should aspire to blue collar positions. This form of programming encourages dependence. Thus, the policy of maintained dependence creates a climate of anger, depression, and hostility within an environment of rigidity (Gullotta, 1983).

School policy and school culture. Student needs are addressed in terms of the school's culture. This culture encourages the managing of policies and regulations to maintain a middle class ruling authority. It is determined in part from the community it serves, and in part by the composition of its staff. The majority of public school faculties, regardless of ethnic or racial background, are middle

class, and as such, work to insure that the schools will perpetuate middle class values. Attempts to alter school policies that discriminate against the poor are resisted and any political change is often predestined to meet with failure. These values permeate decision making, program generation, teaching styles, human interaction, and curriculum.

Attempts to assist minority students often reflect the middle class value structure and follows predictable themes — integration with the adult community, involvement in community projects, increased opportunities to participate in school activities, and an altered school curriculum which teaches about rules, roles, and government (Calabrese & Schumer, 1986). Yet, participation is limited to those who have already accepted the norms of the institution and are not highly alienated. Those who are alienated are asked to leave their culture and join the culture of the established groups. These approaches have not had long term success because the problem of school culture has not been introduced into the equation. Since that ethos is embedded into the minds of those who make and implement policy decisions, it cannot be expected that change can occur at the building level.

Recommendations for change. Unfortunately, change at higher levels usually results in additional layers of bureaucratic involvement. However, greater federal and state control over local school districts, in terms of eliminating discriminatory practices against the poor, may be the only viable solution. State-mandated recommendations should consist of the following:

Recommendation One: Equal education for all students. Currently, with the wide variety of courses offered to students, it is easy to manipulate minority students into courses that sound relevant, are considered easy, or will help the students get a job when they graduate. To reverse this trend, all students should take the same set of courses and have the same experiences (Alder, 1982). This recommendation requires all teachers to teach in a heterogeneous setting, encourages cultural interaction, and individualized instruction.

Recommendation Two: The elimination of policies aimed at financial exploitation. Schooling should be important for all students, not only the advantaged. Within this context, work/study and similar programs that are designed to select minority students into lower status careers should be eliminated. Dependency programs such as the present free or reduced lunch programs for the poor should be restructured. The school lunch program should no longer discriminate against the disadvantaged by providing them with a free lunch ticket. The lunch program should be available at no cost to all students, thus eliminating a major discriminatory school policy. Consideration should also be given toward a policy that requires all students to wear a uniform. The detriments of institutional dress are far outweighed by the fact that the minority will no longer have to compete with their advantaged peers in terms of clothes, a competition that only reinforces a negative self image.

Recommendation Three: The establishment of an aggressive program that will seek out minority, but academically bright students as early as kindergarten and provide them and their families with continuous support. Minority parents should

be trained to supplement the school's instructional program as a means of assisting them to help their children break socioeconomic barriers.

Recommendation Four: The establishment of an ombudsman office that works aggressively for and with the minority student. This office must seek and maintain contact with the members of the minority community and be a proactive presence on their behalf.

Recommendation Five: Mandated inservice programs. These inservice programs should include a self evaluation program that is rooted in mandatory staff development for faculty and administrators as a means of assisting them in reviewing and eliminating the myriad of ways that race, gender, and socioeconomic bias occurs in the school setting.

Recommendation Six: Considering receivership as a potential sanction. Since minority interests are seldom considered, as a means of prodding school districts to eliminate discriminatory practices, state boards should place in receivership those schools who have moderate to high dropout rates, who do not have equal proportions of social groups in all classes, and who do not have equal percentages of social groups going to college.

The use of informal and formal school policies against the minority adolescent must be reduced if students are to learn, work as a community, and respond with a set of values that are essential to society (Newman, 1981). Under the current structure, minority students and their parents face overwhelming odds to alter existing policies. Traditionally, the minority student has responded by withdrawing from school. With the growing shift to greater numbers of minority students in public schools, these policies must be reviewed. Failure on the part of the local governing agencies to eliminate discriminatory policies and practices should be considered a serious infraction against the rights of minorities. This conflict does not have to take place. The school organization can initiate reform by moderating the ethos that dominates the thinking and decision making patterns that govern current school policies, and by accepting an external audit of existing formal and informal practices.

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