

It Takes A Village to Raise a Child

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I applaud Professors Power and Richmond for their valid descriptions of the dead ends America continues to travel in its search for equality of educational opportunity. Professor Power warns of the futility of calls for an equal opportunity to learn in American while generally "ignoring the 'savage inequalities' [in school funding] so vividly portrayed by Jonathan Kozol" (p. 340). Professor Richmond suggests we are not going to solve this pathological inequality by throwing yet another educational program at it. Forced busing can "achieve numerical integration only to become housing for a divided student population (p. 345)." Schools of choice (e.g., Magnet schools) can end by denying many students admission to what was once their neighborhood school. "The schools are saved; the lost children remain lost" (p. 344).

In the initial article, to which both responded, I spoke of "successful inner city public schools [which] ... refuse to be neutral as to whether or not [their students] ... become disciplined, learn to read and count, and experience a sense of community." I called them "the only excellent schools we have in America," because they have the right goals and achieve them against all odds. I also said, "Just how [such] schools appear ... involves stories unique to each" (p. 337). However, I am equally convinced a review here of some of the negative forces each must overcome to achieve excellence can be useful.

Lemann (1986), searching for the origins of America's underclass, concluded that "every aspect of the underclass culture in the ghettos is directly traceable to roots in the [sharecropper] South." He speaks of "two

mass migrations of black Americans. The first ... from the rural South to the urban North ... during the forties, fifties, and sixties The second ... begun in the late sixties — a migration out of the ghettos by members of the black working and middle classes What followed [in the ghettos] was a kind of free fall into ... social disorganization" (p. 35).

To me that free fall continued until, "With too few exceptions, inner city families, neighborhoods, and communities [were no longer] ... accountability systems at all" (page 336) and the "public schools, whose student bodies [were] almost entirely made up on children who must live midst [that] anarchy [became] overwhelmed and out of control" (p. 337). Still we hear of a few public schools succeeding there. What must they be like?

Lemann (1986), citing anthropologist Oscar Lewis, speaks of ghettos as having "a self-generating, destructive culture of poverty," concluding that it is so powerful and pervasive that "any attempt to solve the problems of the underclass in the ghettos [themselves] won't work" (pp. 35-56). Still we hear of a few public schools succeeding there. What must they be like?

Whitehead (1993) asks, "How do we [Americans] begin to reconcile our longstanding belief in equality and diversity with an impressive body of evidence that suggests ... not all family structures produce equal outcomes for children?" (p. 48). This evidence overwhelmingly places a disproportionate number of the most damaging family structures in our nation's inner cities. Still we hear of a few public schools succeeding there. What must they be like?

And what, in our search for equality of educational opportunity in America, are the implications of a Rand Corporation study reported by Steinburg (1992) in *The Harvard Education Letter*? The study compared low income and minority students who won scholarships to three Catholic high schools in New York City with counterparts in two of the city's public high schools. Not surprisingly, the students in the Catholic high schools significantly outperformed their counterparts. Steinberg explains:

First, [the Catholic] schools [had] clear, uncomplicated missions centered on developing students' minds and characters. Faculty ... [viewed] their role as helping every student to learn certain core skills, ... [and] ... learn to abide by the social contract — a set of formal and informal understandings about the responsibilities of community members

In contrast the social contract in the [public] schools [was] vague and weak ... there [were] no real shared goals or reciprocal obligations

The two types of schools also [differed] organizationally. [The Catholic schools were] ... able to protect and sustain a clear identity ... [while the public schools were] seriously constrained by what are commonly called "central office" and "union" pressures. Individual or even group initiative [there] hardly [seemed] worth the effort. (pp. 5-6)

Steinberg concludes that, while the secret to Catholic school success in urban settings has always seemed to lie with its "stricter discipline and back-to-basics pedagogy ... this study points instead to the way in which these schools rely on a social contract and site management." (pp. 5-6)

Fortunately, although each excellent inner city school is unique (is self-made), each battles the same social pathologies infecting their students. It is from these schools, with their histories of self-help, that school districts and unions can learn to help but never frustrate these efforts.

Too often, before an excellent inner city school develops and becomes known beyond its own walls, it first must suffer through years of being an embarrassment to its own central administration and school board: underfunded, overcrowded, dilapidated, segregated, and at war with its own students. At some point during this period, the district unofficially stops expecting anything more from those who work at the school than holding down the violence and staying out of the newspapers. The teachers' union, of course, makes its periodic demands for higher salaries; better, safer working conditions; and smaller classes. But this only "heats up" the adversarial relationship between the faculty and administration, thus assuring the school's continuing impotence.

Finally, a former outstanding inner city classroom teacher, whose rage at the inequalities crushing the students remains undiminished but controlled, is given a turn as principal. (No school ever exceeds its leadership.) Because this once outstanding teacher clearly remembers what is possible in the classroom, he or she concentrates on encouraging each teacher to describe, then create the kind of classroom environment (including the curriculum) each needs to be effective. It is the long-standing absence of expectations from the district office which allows the principal to encourage teachers to teach what their students need rather than only what the district requires. This principal learned what works in classrooms long ago — what works there is whatever a legitimate teacher thinks will work. What does not work, of course, is the belief that nothing will. In fact, this concept is so powerful that the principal worries little about the conceptual soundness of the teacher's ideas, knowing any flaws will be overcome by their increased efforts. For example:

- Should a teacher decide that his or her first obligation to the students is to create and maintain a classroom environment which guarantees everyone's absolute physical and psychological safety each moment of every school day, the teacher's plan is immediately approved and supported.
- Should a teacher believe the surrounding culture of poverty somehow breeds "self-hate" in the students, the teacher's plan to attack it is immediately approved and supported.
- Should a teacher believe that these students are loaded down with a collection of culturally-driven negative myths (like unconquerable racism) and that these myths must be replaced with new, positive ones, the teacher's plan is immediately approved and supported.
- Should a teacher believe that "school" as the district defines it creates an additional set of problems for these already problem-loaded children (e.g., mandatory homework for children who do not live in "homes"; grades and promotion tied to both homework and attendance), the

teacher's plan to soften such inconsistencies is immediately approved and supported.

- Should a teacher believe that the mood in the classroom is all wrong — that the students seem constantly to resist all efforts to teach them and refuse to accept any responsibility for their own educations — the teacher's plan to make school more about the students' questions is immediately approved and supported. (Postman & Weingartner, 1969)

Over time the principal becomes the intellectual, social, and emotional leader of the campus and not merely its appointed administrator. Gradually, a significant evolution occurs among the faculty. Because all ideas for improving one's classes now get immediate approval and support, the number of ideas multiplies and represents the thinking of an increasing portion of the faculty. Now the school's "golden age," its Camelot, is near. Soon, the entire faculty will seek to pull together the successful changes in individual classrooms into a comprehensive campus-wide plan. And this time, their plan for this particular place at this particular point in time is conceptually inspired. What follows then is as good as schools ever get.

Now the faculty arrives early and lingers late into the afternoon. They telephone one another during evenings and weekends searching for additional ways to improve. Their high energy levels are sustained by what is now a collective rage at the inequalities which inundate their students — energy also sustained by the natural drive to make their ideas work. The faculty begins to feel must like a MASH¹ unit: that social triage has handed them children who will emotionally and intellectually die without their immediate and sustained interventions. Such an environment makes the school's "good" teachers better, drives away its weak teachers, and causes excellent teachers to compete for and win any vacant positions.

Now the entire faculty is bright, well informed in their disciplines, and unusually skilled at communicating the meanings they intend. (They achieve this remarkable transfer of meaning by working exclusively within their students' contexts and expanding these contexts in the process.) Each also understands and employs the key to motivation — they cause each

student to succeed because first, each deserves to and second, because nothing else motivates as effectively. Slowly, a social contract grows up among all who work and study there, and their excellence becomes known beyond their walls.

Yes, of course, the students return to the culture of poverty each school-day afternoon — to places where families, neighborhoods, and communities can endanger their own. But they have also spent a portion of those same days among teachers who "refuse to be neutral as to whether or not [their students] ... become disciplined, learn to read and count, and experience a sense of community" (p. 337). They have spent a portion of their days in a school which became a village.

¹Mobile Army Surgical Hospital

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