

# From Debate to Action

**Dan W. Dodson**

**N**OTHING has so challenged the educational establishment of America as the civil rights revolution. When the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the Plessy v. Ferguson doctrine of "separate but equal" in 1954 the focal point in race relations became the schools. The first big challenge was desegregation. The second was to compensate those who bore the scars and trauma of discrimination.

The past fourteen years have been characterized by debate, dialogue, and sometimes open hostility. Few educational leaders supported the courts in their rulings against apartheid education. Most argued that schools were not instruments of reform. If housing were segregated, they saw no responsibility to desegregate schools. The neighborhood school became sacred. The social class limitations upon ability to learn were used to excuse educators from teaching slum children. Although almost half of America's children ride buses to school for other reasons, busing for desegregation became an anathema.

We must now move from debate to action. The future of public education is at stake in the inner cities of this great country. Education must become dynamic, an instrumentality of change, and must bring the minority groups of the country into full-scale participation, or else the common school is doomed.

### **The Interracial Encounter**

The following positions are stated as conclusions reached from the experience of the interracial encounter:

1. *There is no substitute for desegregation.*

The genius of American public education is the "common school." When local schools have an untoward concentration of one group, so that one becomes "ours" and another "theirs," they cease to be common schools and become schools of special interests.

Equality of educational opportunity cannot be provided in such a situation. Two schools cannot be exactly equal, hence to be assigned to one as against the other determines what is expected of both the teacher and the pupil. One may as well ask a layman on the street to rate a community's schools in status as to ask the achievement scores of the pupils, so nearly do teachers' and pupils' performances conform to the community's expectations of them. Hence, the only way to make schools equal is to make all schools equally accessible to all.

The dominant power group in a community will not provide equal opportunity so long as its children live with privilege they do not have to share. The *Hobson v. Hanson* testimony in Washington, D.C., indicated that some status white schools received almost twice as much support per child as did some inner city all black schools. In these situations it is impossible to teach community, for the living arrangement out-educates the educators.

If Black Separatists do not have power enough to command resources to serve "theirs" in situations where there is some leverage to require sharing, it is a foregone conclusion they will not have power enough to require resources if they are forced to fend for themselves in apartheid education. The hope resides in our staying engaged in the encounter until we have forged the new designs of a viable society, rather than in pulling apart in resegregated education. This latter road will prove nothing. It is where Booker T. Washington and "separate but equal" started almost 100 years ago. We know where that road leads.

## 2. *There must be more accountability.*

Educators have contended that what they do is so special that it cannot be evaluated. Hence, neither teachers nor their leaders are accountable if children do not learn. In the ghetto communities, children often make no measurable progress from the beginning of a term until it ends. Negro leadership refers to this as "educational genocide." Teachers cannot claim tenure, and all the privileges they enjoy in large city systems, and be no more accountable for their performance than they are now.

## 3. *Educators should concentrate less on the limitations of the human potential, and more on the limitations of the establishments through which they operate.*

The excuse to the present has been that the limitations were in the human potential. This was scapegoating. It took many forms. At first it was claimed the limitations were biological. Some still make such dastardly claims. Others contend the limitation is not innate, but the slum milieu permanently (or almost so) impairs their sensory mechanisms, so they are unable to learn.

The literature is filled with clichés of the researchers and the apologists for the non-performance of such children. "Low IQ," "low social class," "weak ego strength," "lack of father image with which to relate," "inability to forego immediate pleasures for long-range goals," "matriarchal domination," "cultural deprivation," and now, "lack of preschool stimulation," all suggest the extent to which we have made the human potential the scapegoat for our failures. If the little man of our day ever makes his full upreach and outreach to selfhood his first job will be to beat down the mythologies the scholars have created about him. In the name

of scholarship they would hang him on a cross of validated hypotheses.

The blatant truth is that the teachers and the researchers found what they started out to look for, that is, what was wrong with the human potential—not what was wrong with the institution. Occasionally some local school achieves performances which indicate that these children are educable, and that they can be taught. They also demonstrate that no magic gimmick is needed to turn this trick. It only requires teachers who believe they can learn, principals who help create learning situations by good supervision, and a leadership within the community to support the endeavor. These are the major ingredients.

#### 4. *Better school-community relations.*

The Ford Foundation leadership believes the removal of schools from responsible parental and community participation is the real malaise besetting the inner city schools. They have recommended that New York City's system be broken up into 60 autonomous districts, and control turned over to the local community and the parents. While this is perhaps a simplistic solution it does indicate the need for a real partnership between the school and its community. Despite all the literature on school-community relations, a demonstration of a viable relationship between the school and the community in low-income neighborhoods is a rarity. This is an urgent matter today, if the schools are to regain relevance in the ghettos.

### **The Real Confrontation**

Unless school systems can move on these issues posthaste, the Separatist segment of the Negro community will persuade parents to accept apartheid, and return to the ancient doctrine of "separate but equal." In this move, the Separatists and the backslashers will have won, and the structure will be set for a new era of tribalism in education.

The time for debate is past. We are engaged in the real confrontation to test whether education can serve equally *all* the children of the community, or whether it is an inert institutional arrangement designed to serve the power interests of the dominant society. It is easy to become weary with the encounter and wish to disengage from it. Such retreat at this late hour in history would be a travesty on our heritage. Let us join the encounter and forge the new designs of a program commensurate with the challenges of our era. Anything less is unworthy of American professional educational leadership.

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