



# *The Spirit of the Law...*

**SHIRLEY H. SCHELL \***

■ The next day all hell broke loose. Man, when they threw that teacher through the window, I cut out for home. I covered those twenty-six blocks in nothing flat.

■ Well, it's like every day is just something I got to get through. They'd like me to quit, but I ain't gonna give 'em the satisfaction.

■ Well, it's all right, I guess, but we're just kinda there. We ain't really a part of the school. I know it's supposed to be better, but mostly we wish we had our own school back.

■ I have four Negro children in my first grade class this year. I know I should treat them the same as I do the white children, but I just can't. Somehow I just can't.

EACH of these statements was made by a person in a desegregated school, three students and one teacher. The first statement was made by a white boy as he described the near-riot which occurred in his high school following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. He attends a desegregated school, which now has about an equal number of black and white students, in a small city on the Atlantic seaboard.

As the number of black students has increased, the problems of desegregation have become more acute. The black students are becoming militant in their demands for greater recognition, for teachers who can relate to them, and for more opportunities to participate in school activities. The turnover of faculty and administration has become a serious

\* Shirley H. Schell, Instructor, Delaware Technical and Community College, Wilmington, and Counselor, Upward Bound Program, University of Delaware, Newark

problem. This school is typical of a great number of urban high schools which have undergone dramatic changes as black families have moved into residential areas abandoned by whites in their exodus to the suburbs.

The second statement was made by a black girl who is one of about a dozen black students attending an affluent suburban high school, typical of many which are "integrated" by a handful of black students whose great misfortune it is to live in an otherwise upper-middle-class suburb. This school has no black teachers, and there is no effort made to meet the individual needs of the few black students. The typical student in this school drives his own car, probably carries more pocket money than his teachers, and displays little awareness of, or concern for, the problems of his society. This girl described to me the gauntlet she must run daily as she passes from class to class. "Nigger" is probably the kindest of the epithets she is called. She reported that she had complained to the principal and vice-principal, but nothing was ever done to help her. "You can't do nothing to those rich kids," she said. "The teachers are all afraid of them."

The third statement was made by a black student in a rural high school only recently desegregated because of consolidation. His attitude was one of resignation and acceptance of the fact that he and the other black students were getting short shrift. He had wanted to take a leadership role in the student government organization, as he had done in his segregated school, but had found that positions of leadership were going exclusively to white students. Perhaps he will not always be resigned. Perhaps other black students will not be as willing as he has been to accept the status quo.

The last statement was made by a first-grade teacher in a newly integrated school in the Middle-West. She described how the little children would crowd eagerly around her for attention and affection. In spite of her intellectual acceptance of desegregation, she found herself unable to give the same attention and affection to the little black children that she gave generously to the whites.

## Failure of Desegregation

These examples illustrate as no statistics can some of the attitudes and problems which are causing black parents to feel that desegregation is not the answer to the educational problems of their children. In a recent article in the *New York Times Magazine*, Robert S. Browne<sup>1</sup> discussed the case for two Americas and pointed out that the failure of school desegregation is a factor in the Black Nationalist movement and in the demands of black parents for local control of their schools.

If white Americans are sincerely interested in searching out the causes for the obvious failure of school desegregation, we do not have far to look. We have been so busy finding ways to implement the letter of the law that we have given little thought to the spirit of the law. Indeed, a great deal of effort has gone into devising ways to subvert the spirit of the law while fulfilling the letter. Bussing, pairing, redistricting, consolidation, and many other strategies have been tried to achieve desegregation.

<sup>1</sup> Robert S. Browne. "The Case for Two Americas—One Black, One White." *The New York Times Magazine*, August 11, 1968.

With some notable exceptions, these arrangements have failed because little real effort has been made to change attitudes in the white communities. For example, in practically every case the emphasis of the much disputed bussing has been on getting the black child to a white school so that he might be made a little more like the white child. Little has been done to help the white child believe that he also would gain something from the experience. White America simply does not believe it has anything to gain from integration.

If "separate but equal" schools are inherently bad, then "integrated" schools ought to have some positive benefits for *all* students, white as well as black. Nevertheless, the focus in integration has been exclusively on the advantages to be gained by the black children. It is hard not to conclude that it was presumed the white children would gain nothing from the new experience. Perhaps this is the key to the failure. It has been too one-sided. White society has said to the black student that the purpose of integration is to help him become more like the white students.

The emphasis of integration should have been to provide the black student with a better opportunity to discover himself and realize his own potential. Perhaps the white child should have understood that integration would have some advantages for him, too—opportunities to know people different from himself, to learn from them and to share his own experiences. Despite many fine declarations to the contrary, the emphasis in American education has long been on making all students as nearly like one another as possible. The failure of desegregation is just one more example of the failure of American education. We cannot make black students like white students, any more than we can make all white children copies of one another.

## Problems of Integration

There are now two possible courses of action. We can acknowledge desegregation as a dismal failure, accept the thinking of an increasing number of black parents that quality education can exist in *de facto* segregated schools, and work to make the ghetto schools as good as, or hopefully better than, the best of our suburban schools. Or we can attempt to fulfill the *spirit* of the law and work to achieve true integration. To do the latter requires that we acknowledge certain facts.

First, it is a fact that every certified teacher is not qualified to teach the economically and educationally deprived. Only when an effort is made to remove those teachers who are psychologically unable to relate to these children and replace them with teachers who can, will any real progress be made. It may be that many teachers, both black and white, can be enabled to do such teaching by extensive sensitivity training. Yet few, if any, teachers are helped to teach the "disadvantaged" by attending a summer seminar or an in-service program in which the focus is on understanding the disadvantaged child or the presentation of new teaching methods or gadgets.

The problem that needs to be dealt with is not the "needs of the child" or "understanding the inner-city culture." The problem, the real problem, is the teacher's ability to accept and respond to these students as human beings with the same basic needs as his own and with unique personalities

which can enrich his teaching experience. If he cannot do this, he cannot teach these students, and his presence in the classroom does harm to all the children, black and white.

Before any real progress is made, we must devise ways of determining which teachers and administrators can be effective in integrated schools and give them all the support they need. An administrator who supports a track system, and is not disturbed by the fact that most of the black students in his school are in either the basic education track or some kind of vocational track, will never provide effective leadership for an integrated school.

A principal who advises a teacher desperately trying to be effective in an overcrowded, desegregated classroom that the black students cannot learn much anyway and he should just talk with them is not psychologically suited to foster integration. The teacher who cannot respond emotionally to what he acknowledges intellectually will cripple the capacity of all his students to respond to each other.

It is also a fact that the black children have a great deal to contribute to the educational environment. We must acknowledge this and build on their contributions. There is much discussion now about the "self-actualized"<sup>2</sup> person. Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow have identified some of the characteristics of such persons as spontaneity, joy, and awareness.<sup>3</sup> In working with many students from economically deprived backgrounds in the Upward Bound Program, I have been impressed by the fact that it is these very qualities which keep these young people going in the face of overwhelming obstacles.

One of the most reassuring anecdotes I have ever heard, is an experience related by one of our Upward Bound students. She described in hilarious detail her 30-block journey to school on a morning when the sidewalks and streets were coated with ice and the buses were out on strike. In spite of economic hardship, personal family tragedy, indifferent and hostile teachers, this girl is still able to find much that is wonderful and much that is funny. She is able to relate to others and to share their problems. If her school environment had valued these qualities, she could have made a significant contribution.

Another of our Upward Bound students, when I questioned him about what he had found most valuable in the program, answered that he had learned that he could learn. He should have been enabled to discover this in his school. How many are there who, like him, will not make this discovery in school? Can our society afford to lose their contributions?

We have not achieved integrated schools. To integrate means to make a whole by putting together the parts. Resegregation of desegregated schools? Merely to desegregate, if by that we mean only to place the two races together in one facility, is at best a dubious goal.

We must decide what we want. If we want integrated schools, we must find ways of implementing the spirit of the law. If we merely want to desegregate, then we ought to acknowledge that the idea is doomed to failure, abandon it, and give our support to those black parents who are demanding quality schools, segregated or otherwise. □

<sup>2</sup> Jane Howard. "Inhibitions Thrown to the Winds." *Life* 65 (2); July 12, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham H. Maslow. *Toward a Psychology of Being*. New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1962.

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