

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Contributors: Joan Ehren
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Educating Children of the Poor

40 East Cedar Street
Chicago, Illinois

Dear Editor:

I read your recent publication *Educating the Children of the Poor*¹ and was very much disappointed. Seven or eight years ago some education critics struggled to bring to our attention the indisputable fact that children of the poor have a desire to learn, and yet are being victimized and subverted by school systems all over the United States. Eight years later we now have task force members of a national education organization "spelling out" those same needs and deficits.

In spite of the eloquent introduction, *Educating the Children of the Poor* is just another description of the visible part of the iceberg. Many professionals who teach and work with poor children are perhaps more aware than the task force of *that* part of the iceberg. What we now need from educational leadership is not another description of programs with a call for more research, but a deeper involvement with the crucial, immediate, and long-range issues facing the ghetto schools. There is real need for a change within the educational establishment and it must begin by giving those on the "firing line" action instead of pronouncements, implementation instead of recommendations.

We know that "the attitude of teachers and administrators and their performances have provoked widespread retardation." And we know that "the schools have failed." We now need to examine more thoroughly why the public schools have failed to educate disadvantaged children.

I am convinced that better education for children of the poor will never be provided unless professionals working within the ghetto schools become better educated. This would require a major overhauling of the undergraduate and graduate curriculum for teachers, supervisors, and administrators, together with a major change in attitude on the part of the graduate school faculties.

¹ Alexander Frazier, editor. *Educating the Children of the Poor*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1968. 56 pp.

Such a change would require graduate faculties to do more than verbalize "the importance of the teacher." When teacher education programs demonstrate "the importance of the teacher," education departments will no longer be filled with professors who are anxious and most willing to turn their attention away from students at the first opportunity that arises. Professors of education will not be "too busy" with "other responsibilities" to neglect their primary responsibility in preparing competent and skilled professionals for effective performance in schools. There will be many more professors who are not afraid and who are willing to place at the top of the priority list a commitment and involvement with the children, the schools, and the ghetto communities.

Will faculties of departments of education ever be willing to do this? I don't think so! Most changes in teacher education have been superficial, and most professors who teach courses about the disadvantaged are not very relevant to the people who work with children of the poor.

Teacher preparation is only one of the crucial issues facing the slum school. It is only a small part of the enormous challenge that is now being made to the form and organization of our educational system. We need to ask those who are personally involved more about the priority of needs in the section entitled "The Task Ahead." We might find the priorities in a different order or just different from those of the task force.

The judgment of many teachers is that curriculum development and proper supervision of the implementation of innovations are of first importance in upgrading the education of poor children. Most teachers also agree that their professional talents and energies are not being adequately utilized in the search for better curriculum. Often, in fact, attempts to initiate or innovate new curriculum projects are discouraged. Teachers are given neither the time nor the money to pursue in breadth and intensity the necessary teacher involvement for such programs.

While administrators refuse or are afraid to fight for more pay and time for teachers, they, in turn, neglect the development and implementation of curriculum. By choice or because of institutional bureaucracy, they are at a greater distance from the classroom and from direct personal involvement with teachers and children. Most ghetto schools are suffering from a serious breakdown of communication within the school organization. "The Task Ahead" must focus on ways to decrease the polarization between faculty and administration.

In addition, this is a period of history wherein the air throughout the schools in the ghetto is disturbed by winds of educational revolution. I refer to the activism of black teachers, the development of militant teacher unionism, the enactment in New York State of the Taylor Law, the polarization of black and white within the school organization, and a host of other related educational trends.

"The Task Ahead" closes by telling us that there is a war going on in the hallways and classrooms of the slum schools. I could not agree more! However, it can no longer be won with traditional responses about the failings of the school and about what we do not know. Traditional responses no longer seem appropriate to the immediate problems.

Sincerely,
JOAN EHREN

Passkey to Status?

61 White Oak Street
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Dear Editor:

The October 1968 issue of EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP entitled "The Impact of Social Forces on Education" is a valuable contribution to all interested in curriculum. However, as a recent practicing administrator, it seems to me that a very simple but important force exerted on our schools, if not on education, was ignored. We ignore very simple and evident truths so often that those educators not directly on the firing line in elementary and secondary schools may tend to forget them. I refer here to the primary purpose of the public school as parents see it.

Education textbooks and professors of education engage in long and involved discussions on the purposes of the school as if these purposes of the school were the same as the purpose of education. Any honest parent and every practitioner knows that parents believe the first and foremost duty of the school is to make it possible for its pupils to jump the hurdles and pass the tests necessary for college entrance. For higher education or, more accurately, higher schooling is regarded as the passkey to status and economic opportunity. Any education that takes place in the process is a bonus.

Ask any parent what he means by the term "good school." He will tell you in substance if not in words that he refers to the presence of a large number of students who will be eligible for college after graduation or, better yet, for advanced placement in college. He certainly does not refer to young people who are developing into good citizens and who can be effective leaders in moving our society toward more democracy.

There are many organized groups which have their own pet formulas for changing the school, whether it be through including sex education in the curriculum, for example, through developing educational parks, or through decentralization. We find, however, that even the individuals who are members of such groups want, most of all, that their children be able to gain admission to college; they judge a school which can accomplish this for its pupils as successful. Individual Negroes who want their children to attend middle-class white schools usually are not pressing

for integration for idealistic reasons. They want their children in these schools because they believe the teachers there will do a better job of preparing their children for college. If this does not happen, they could not care less about integration.

Many of the white parents who may object to Negroes being present in the schools are for some reason afraid that the presence of Negroes in the schools will make it more difficult for the teachers to prepare their children for the hurdles of college entrance examinations. That their children can get a better education if Negroes are a part of the classroom is of little concern to them. Citizens who are pressuring for valid educational changes in the school curriculum no less than other citizens are first of all concerned that their children will be able to enter college.

Parents who are sure their children will be able to pass these tests regardless of the kind of instruction they receive in school, because they read well and remember what they read, are for the most part those parents who are interested in the school's providing good education. Whether the parent is a welfare parent living in the ghetto or an advertising executive living in Scarsdale, he wants his children to have the passkey to status and a well paying job. He regards the school as having that key.

Never before in our history have so many of our citizens claimed the right to this passkey. In previous years many citizens were resigned to settle for less. Educational writers all too often appear guilty of ignoring this simple truth. In the U.S. we have a materialistic society, and "making it" means material success. The citizenry looks upon the school as a means to status and money while we educators talk about education for democracy and self-fulfillment.

It seems to me that before we can do a better job of real education, we must start with our citizens where they are. We should acknowledge that the public school system, more than ever before, is influenced by college requirements, because more citizens than ever are expecting to go to college. Colleges should change their entrance requirements so there is more emphasis on the skills needed for the survival of our democracy and less on reading and regurgitating. Some kind of post-secondary school education should be made available to all.

Imagine what would happen in our high school if all the colleges tomorrow started requiring 40 hours of instruction in ballet dancing for entrance. After the initial shock and loud objections, parents would demand that high schools give ballet dancing immediately and all parents would want their children enrolled. Whether the children had a talent or liking for ballet dancing would be of little or no consequence.

We see a glimmer of hope from some of our college students. Perhaps the school, their homes, or their churches have gotten through to them with some of the ideas which the school has been preaching if not practicing, or perhaps those students who already have money and status have found out how meaningless these material things are. In any case some college students are demanding an education, schooling that is more relevant. Perhaps this will be a factor in causing colleges eventually to modify their entrance examinations.

We still have a lot to learn about the best methods of educating children and youth. However, we are not able to put into practice the

full knowledge we already possess because society demands that we focus first on matters that make material success possible. Our schools are not ignoring this demand. Some of us are just making believe that we are.

It seems to me that we must do more toward providing schooling beyond high school for those who cannot enter college. At the same time we should proceed, as suggested by Muriel Crosby, to involve all parents in the schools in a significant way. Only so will we have a better opportunity to work toward providing more relevant education for all today's children and young people.

Sincerely,
BARBARA T. MASON

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