

Demands for Recognition—and Beyond

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THE ultimate objective of education is to enable each child to build a positive image of himself as a person and a learner. By now, even the general public is aware of the myriad theories on how to educate children who reside in poverty areas.

I believe that goals (whatever they may be) for educating all children should be the same. To methodize and systematize education for "disadvantaged" youth as a remedy for "deficits," or to focus solely upon the development of narrowly defined cognitive skills, is destructive to these desirable goals. Such approaches perpetuate more permanent damage by limiting those opportunities all children need to develop active, thoughtful, and creative ways of coping with the real problems of our culture.

To support this growth the teacher should express consistently in action and in words a respect for each child, his world, and his communications. The teacher, in turn, needs support from the school to sustain a climate—from the receptionist to the principal—which respects and invites community people.

A black child of the urban poor suspects very early in life that people who solve problems in his world are white. The people who own things, really big and important things, are white. In his ghetto elementary school, you will hear him refer to the principal as the man who "owns" the school. The teachers working for him are paid from his personal funds. When the child "attacks" the school building by scratching obscenities on the walls and breaking windows, he is striking out at an "institution" which has

never been part of his community—but just another building owned by a man who comes in at 8 a.m. to see if the children are "good" and leaves at 3 p.m. after things are shut down and locked up. Of course he hires a "couple of guys" to clean up the place; and, oh yes, he pays their salaries, too.

It is unalterably clear to this youngster that whites are so all-powerful that there is little need to question where the principal obtains the money to conduct such an operation—he is just naturally rich, as all white people are.

As the child walks to school, he observes building projects going on, busy white electricians, plumbers, and crane operators (the greatest job of all!) performing tasks, while on a nearby corner a small group of unemployed black men—men who look like him, talk like him, and share his neighborhood—are just "hanging out," casualties of union discrimination. There are people with whom he can identify working in the supermarket and laundromat, but the one who is obviously in charge—the one who opens and closes and leaves with the bag of money—is not one of his people.

On occasion, when the elementary school teacher and student talk in a relaxed way, the child's questioning conversation often resembles this:

"How long does it take you to get home?"

"What kind of car do you drive?"

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"How many cars do you own?"

"Where do *your* children go to school?"
(Many teachers and administrators send their children to private schools.)

These questions are a part of his "teacher testing" program. His findings help to support early feelings that there is geographic, social, and economic distance between himself and the people performing the tasks which determine his destiny.

It is through experiences like these that black college-age youth of today have developed a set of social survival skills. They have amassed an inordinate amount of information (about schools, police, colleges, churches, and so forth), unrecorded, unrefined, but nonetheless necessary, information that needs to be known and understood by "Brothers" and "Sisters" alike.

For example, mass media perpetuate fear stories in describing why so few whites dare to enter Harlem. Black youngsters are aware that whites by the thousands, from wealthy and not-so-wealthy communities, make trips into the heart of Harlem to attend City College and the High School of Music and Art because they are prestigious and free. While at the same time, both institutions apparently resist admitting black youngsters who live only a few blocks away.

This and other forms of cruel irony are continually perpetrated on the black community. A more recent neighborhood observation has revealed an influx of white male teachers. While this can be desirable, their motives are more a result of fear of being drafted than altruism or legitimate career choice. The draft deferment they receive when accepting an assignment in a "disadvantaged" school is a more than desirable alternative. This "contract" between the young white men and the draft boards across the nation takes place at a time when young blacks are willing to face battle—for the wrong reasons. It is also true that their schools forgot to teach them that their ancestors fought bravely in all American wars. Armed with this lack of knowledge, they are anxious to prove that blacks are good fighting men, a carefully hidden, but not so

secret, "secret" among veteran fighting men of all colors.

The anti-war movement is lower in priority and some distance behind the black students' demands for colleges to institute machinery for "open enrollment." Their militant efforts—amidst establishment cries of maintaining "standards"—are beginning to have far-reaching influence on the restructuring of schooling at all levels.

In the New York City University system, for example, these changes are coming about as the administration attempts to deal with commitments regarding admission for a larger number of black and Puerto Rican students.

Many such students will not have the desired grade point average required for admission. Among the many things they will have, however, is a real desire to attend college. As educators attempt to predict future success of entering freshmen, they may find that the quest for an opportunity and the will to succeed are more significant variables than test scores. These drives are primary components of this new generation of young blacks. Recently liberated from feelings of inferiority and self-doubt, they express the desire to return, after graduation, to their indigenous society where people are experiencing a passion for education—a passion rekindled by neighborhood adults who have become actively involved in local school boards. In New York City this has become self-evident in the demonstration districts of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Two Bridges, and the Intermediate School 201 Complex.

At Brooklyn College, a division of the City University of New York, where I have taught in graduate and undergraduate departments, we have had our share of confrontations with students. As in many institutions of this nature, traditional methods of dealing with students' concerns are slow and ineffective. Often, fulfillment of the simplest student-expressed need will span several semesters before minimal action is taken. By that time, students who originated the request have moved on to higher academic status and have acquired a new set of concerns.

At Brooklyn College a small group of black students—rooted in a crisis of identity—formed the Brooklyn League of Afro-American Collegians (B.L.A.C.). They had two requests worthy of negotiating with the administration: the enrollment of more black students, and Afro-American course offerings with full recognition for college credit.

When these requests were made, the black and Puerto Rican student population enrolled in full-time day sessions had never exceeded 2 percent. The Borough of Brooklyn, where the college is located, has a black population of over 40 percent. Students asked the question: Is a college morally bound to serve the community in which it is located? If so, to what degree?

The other issue is one with which we are all familiar—the request for courses reflecting academic recognition of Afro-American heritage. The Brooklyn College catalogue lists courses in German, Italian, Greek, Hebrew, and Yiddish, in addition to four literary-cultural courses on Israel. The majority of these offerings are designed as discrete language courses. However, black students argued that it is difficult to teach a language without covering in some way the history and life-style of people who live in areas where the language is spoken. They further argued that Swahili, a widely spoken language in large areas of Africa, is used by merchants and tradesmen. Therefore, a course should be designed to reflect the importance of this language in the academic community. They pointed out currently listed Brooklyn College courses such as Elementary Yiddish I and II, Hebrew Poetry, History of Ancient Greece, and Poetry of Modern Israel as the type of courses that could serve as content models for black studies.

If significant recognition of black heritage is to come about, there needs to be an academic impact seen and felt by people from all professions and disciplines. Few may elect to enroll in Poetry of Modern Israel, but thousands of students, teachers, and parents will see it in the college catalogue. This publication constitutes recogni-

tion and sanction that help to establish a mental and emotional fix in the minds of many that college students *should* be learning about Israel.

As on many campuses, unfilled requests of this nature turned quickly into demands, and Brooklyn College began to have its share of "student unrest."

My belief is that the City University of New York, no longer having a selective system to exclude "poorly achieving" students, will begin to "talk" to high school personnel and devise realistic methods for improving education at that level. As endless internal committees and subcommittees are formed, college and "feeder" high school faculty members will be participating in actual policy formation in their respective institutions (many for the first time).

Communication with continuity and content will be devised by college faculty members to share in improving learning opportunities for students they expect to receive in the future.

The high schools will respond by exerting more influence on the junior high or intermediate level. Supervisors, administrators, and teachers in both divisions will communicate with one another in new and meaningful ways (another first!). The total academic community will be revived as the demands for change extend through the elementary school to kindergarten.

We know that it has been in the lower grades that contact is lost between school and parents. Children attending school for the first time do so with great joy and anticipation. The spirit of this desire is lost by many youngsters before reaching junior high school.

We also know that in very fundamental ways, the family unit—the home—*contrives* to be the prime source of education for its members. Schooling, as we know it, does not constitute the whole of one's education, but needs, nevertheless, to connect itself to the learnings of the child outside of school hours. We must undertake, at all levels, active and aggressive information-sharing, making school programs accessible, visible, and understandable to the public. □

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