

# A Survey of **BLACK STUDIES:** **POSITION AND OPINIONS**

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**T**WO factors concerning black Americans have become increasingly clear to many educators in recent years. One is that the contributions of blacks in helping build America have been largely ignored by historians in textbooks. The other is that because of this disregard of black contributions, black youth may pass through their entire academic career with the feeling that their race had not made any contributions in history, literature, music, or other fields of endeavor. The understandable consequence of this seeing history as a "white" picture is that blacks quite often perceive themselves as being different, discriminated against, or as being inferior to other races in America.

For this reason it was determined in the fall of 1969 to attempt to ascertain what was being done concerning Black Studies in secondary schools in the states within the North Central Association. More specifically the study attempted to discover when Black Studies were adopted, why Black Studies were or were not adopted, the nature of the program, the criteria for selecting Black Studies instructors, whether student interest in Black Studies was increasing or decreasing, and what secondary social studies department heads felt the proper position of Black Studies should be in the curriculum.

A review of literature pertaining to Black Studies revealed there was little agreement

among authors. Authors did agree that there were inadequacies in textbooks and that a critical need exists for in-service training for prospective Black Studies instructors. Authors agreed that most teachers were ill-prepared to teach Black Studies, but that teachers were the key to success or failure of the program. Regardless of how well prepared the materials might be, the program lived or died in the hands of the teacher.

Authors disagreed vehemently as to whether schools should or could improve self-concept through Black Studies. Advocates referred to no less an authority than the men who wrote the Seven Cardinal Principles, who stated, "The school is the only agency that may be controlled definitely and consciously by our democracy for the purpose of unifying its people."<sup>1</sup>

Cuban questioned whether improvement of self-concept through Black Studies was possible, claiming there was no evidence to support such assertions. Cuban warned, "... curriculum directors who suggest im-

<sup>1</sup> Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education. *Cardinal Principles of Education*. Bureau of Education Bulletin 1918, No. 35. Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1918.

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proved self-concept as a learning outcome assume the risk of being called charlatans."<sup>2</sup>

Carton pointed to Germany, Japan, and Italy of World War II in reminding of the dangers inherent in attempting to manipulate humans and social status.<sup>3</sup> Other historians declared history should record events as they happened, not as they "should" have happened.<sup>4</sup>

Concern was also expressed over academic standards in Black Studies programs. Black leaders such as Roy Wilkins and Bayard Rustin demanded high standards which would prepare blacks for the world.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, some writers suggested that high academic standards may have to be set aside in the area of Black Studies.

## A Survey of Practice

To gain the information desired in the study, a closed-ended questionnaire of 30 questions was developed. A list of schools belonging to the North Central Association with an enrollment of over 1,000 students in grades 10, 11, and 12 was secured. From this list of 864 schools, 306 were randomly selected to serve as respondents to the instrument. An attempt was made to secure the names of the social studies department heads from the principals of the randomly selected high schools. The instrument was then distributed to the heads of the social studies departments in the sample schools.

The final number of usable returned questionnaires was 260, or 84.97 percent of the total sample. Respondents from all 19 states in the North Central Association except Arkansas returned the instrument.

The sample was then divided into the

<sup>2</sup> Larry Cuban. "Not 'Whether?' But 'Why?' and 'How?'—Instructional Materials on the Negro in the Public Schools." *The Journal of Negro Education* 36: 434-36; Fall 1967.

<sup>3</sup> Aaron S. Carton. "Poverty Programs, Civil Rights, and the American School." *School & Society* 95: 108-109; February 18, 1967.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas E. Spencer. "On the Place of the Negro in American History." *The Social Studies* 60: 150-58; April 1969.

<sup>5</sup> "Black Students: Yes or No?" *America* 120: 578-79; May 17, 1969.

following categories and comparisons of frequencies were made:

1. Schools from metropolitan areas (100,000 population)
2. Schools from non-metropolitan areas (Less than 100,000 population)
3. Schools with a black population (If more than 10 percent of the school population were blacks it was considered enough to have an impact.)
4. Schools without a black population (Less than 10 percent black enrollment).

The results of the study applied to schools of the North Central Association and could not be projected to other areas of the nation. The North Central Association consists of 19 states covering an area which extends from West Virginia in the east to Arizona in the west. There was only one state, Arkansas, which would be considered actually "southern." None of the five Arkansas respondents returned the first questionnaire mailed to them. The five respondents were mailed an additional questionnaire accompanied by a follow-up letter. Two of the follow-up letters were returned unanswered. One of the respondents had written across the instrument, "I do not wish to take part in this survey." The other letter was returned unopened, with an indication by the post office that the respondent had refused to accept it. From this it could be concluded that a similar study conducted in other sections of the United States might well result in completely different frequencies and percentages concerning both the position of Black Studies and opinions of department heads about Black Studies.

The following conclusions were drawn after tabulating and analyzing the data:

Black population schools appeared to be an urban problem, with almost four-fifths of the black population schools located in metropolitan areas. It was further concluded that blacks make up an important part of 22.3 percent of the schools whose department chairmen responded to the study.

Approximately one-half of the respondents who returned the instrument reported that the area of Black Studies was offered in

their institution. Some critics have maintained that the reaction of American education is always years, or decades, behind the need for changes in the curriculum. Not only radical, but moderate students as well, demand or plead that the curriculum be made relevant. Perhaps the fact that in 1970 only one-half of the schools in the survey had a Black Studies program in their curriculum is a severe indictment against education in general and social studies in particular.

Differences were noted within the North Central area regarding the responses of social studies chairmen concerning Black Studies. While respondents in all school classifications displayed empathy toward Black Studies, this was more pronounced in black population and metropolitan schools where most blacks were found. A higher percentage of metropolitan and black population schools had Black Studies programs than did non-metropolitan and non-black population schools. Respondents indicated that approximately one-half of the schools in the total sample had a Black Studies program. Black Studies in the four subclassifications varied from almost four-fifths in the black population schools to much less (41.79 percent) in non-black population schools. Comparison of schools that had Black Studies also revealed that metropolitan and black population schools spent longer periods of time on the program than did non-metropolitan and non-black population schools.

### **To Improve Self-Concept?**

One of the most interesting results of the study was the overwhelming percentage of respondents in all classifications who felt it was legitimate to emphasize black contributions to history as a means of improving the self-concept of blacks despite well-known dangers inherent in such a practice. Despite these potential hazards, 70.35 percent of the respondents indicated that in their opinion special emphasis to improve self-concept was legitimate, while only 16.37 percent of the total sample of respondents indicated there should not be any form of indoctrination for the purpose of improving self-concept.

It was discovered that Black Studies are a relatively new phenomenon, for almost nine-tenths of the programs were started in the period of 1967-1969, and respondents reported only four Black Studies programs were in existence in sample schools prior to 1965. There was evidence, however, which indicated that the growth of Black Studies might have peaked and leveled off. Respondents from schools with Black Studies reported interest has remained approximately the same, rather than increasing during the past year. In a majority of the schools which did not have Black Studies, there were no reported plans to begin such programs. There was an absence of interest in Black Studies by students of predominantly white schools. This is unfortunate, as the need for an understanding of black contributions may be as great for white students as it is for blacks.

An interesting outcome of the study was the information that respondents, by large percentages, said their Black Studies came about as a result of a need felt by faculty or administrators. Minority and community pressures were far behind this felt need as an influence in starting Black Studies as reported by the respondents. A militant might question the validity of these statements, and in the light of the fact that almost nine-tenths of the Black Studies programs were started in the years 1967-1969, the militant might justifiably conclude that the need was felt as a result of black demands. It would be of interest to discover what pressures caused this need suddenly to be felt in 1967 after lying dormant for so many years. Unfortunately the study was unable to ascertain these pressures. However, the fact that social studies department heads saw themselves as change agents is of importance. Whether correct or not, if the respondents did in fact perceive themselves as leaders of change, Black Studies will probably improve in the coming years.

### **Materials and Objectives**

With the rapid growth of Black Studies it is understandable that the great majority of department heads have found the mem-

bers of their staffs to be poorly prepared to teach Black Studies. By the same line of reasoning, it was not surprising to learn that textbooks were of little value in teaching Black Studies.

The survey indicated, however, that supplementary materials now on the market were deemed adequate in teaching Black Studies.

The survey indicated that social studies department heads completely rejected militant demands for Black Studies. Most faculty members felt Black Studies should properly be integrated into existing courses. The respondents requested that Black Studies be an elective open to all students, and almost nine-tenths of the respondents said the best qualified should instruct Black Studies regardless of race. The propositions that only a black could and should teach Black Studies, and that special provisions should be made to certify non-qualifying blacks to teach, were clearly rejected. In this overt rejection of militant demands, the respondents agreed

with Stephen J. Wright, a leader of the moderate black community and former president of Fisk University, who said, "Competence to teach and learn in the area of Black Studies is not a function of race, creed, or color."<sup>6</sup>

Respondents were given five objectives in teaching Black Studies and requested to list them in order of importance. There was agreement in all classifications that the objective of the highest priority was to portray accurately the history of black Americans. It was notable, however, that schools without blacks listed the improvement of whites' concept of blacks to be the second most important objective, while in all other classifications, improvement of blacks' self-concept was considered to be of second importance. From this it would appear logical that Black Studies should not be stereotyped, but be varied and tailored to meet the needs of individual schools and communities. □

<sup>6</sup> Stephen J. Wright. "Black Studies and Sound Scholarship." *Phi Delta Kappan* 51: 365-68; March 1970.

## Student Unrest: Threat or Promise?

*Edited by* RICHARD L. HART *and* J. GALEN SAYLOR  
*for the ASCD Council on Secondary Education*

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