

Redirecting the Focus on the Black Student

PHYLLIS WIGGINS

UNDENIABLY the historic 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision, opposing racial segregation in education; the ensuing Civil Rights Movement; and today's focus on racial pride and an African heritage have worked for the general good of the black student. Nevertheless, far too much of education's well-intentioned desire to make "social reparation" to the black student for the nation's past social sins has been working, on the contrary, to the black student's detriment. This is particularly true at the elementary and the secondary levels.

This can be seen graphically in a neighborhood that is fast changing racially. Such a neighborhood is that surrounding Milwaukee's Rufus King High School, where upper middle class black families of the managerial and professional circles—and the rapidly rising lower-middle class blacks with them—are now transferring their children from the elementary schools of the area and from predominantly black high schools as well. Some are even willing to pay tuition in the schools of Milwaukee's suburbs in order to assure that their offspring will receive the scholastic and citizenship challenges which they believe will make them eligible to compete with other Americans on a basis of assurance and equality.

What is the problem?

Basically, it is that far too many sociologists and educators seem to feel that all central city education should be synonymous with blacks who are more culturally deprived than the rest of the nation: with the black who comes from a home where there are no books, newspapers, and magazines; where there is lack of educational incentive from within the home; and where moral and citizenship standards of behavior are still far beneath those generally accepted for the rest of the nation. And though blacks who send their children away from all-black education realize that this is not true, they nevertheless feel that all education, where public, is predicated on such premises.

They do so with much reason.

For example, since September 1968 some 1,000 pupils have passed through the reading center at Rufus King. Half of them have been freshmen, referred by the predominantly black feeder elementary schools, the other half being sophomores who have been referred by classroom teachers within the school, or students entering King from other high schools where they had been enrolled in reading centers.

Yet it is a fair and safe estimate that of the total number of reading cases which have



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passed through King's center, about 85 percent of them have not been "remedial reading cases," but rather pupils whose learning and academic progress have been atrophied because reasonable academic standards, to say nothing of acceptable social behavioral standards, have not been demanded of them. This situation is just as much accepted by the people of the central cities, as a whole, as it is by the rest of the nation.

Intelligent black parents realize this. They also accept the social reality that black boys and girls cannot live, and do not now live, in a totally black world. They are beginning to demand that education everywhere prepare their offspring with the skills and the social and cultural know-how that will permit blacks to compete professionally on a level with any other persons.

While it is open to the demands of those pupils who desire a black curriculum as they plan to spend their lives in a "black community," King High School has also tried to move curriculum-wise to help the student who plans to go on to college and to recapture the support, at least, of the affluent black family in its still racially integrated and typically middle class environs. As a result of this redirected focus, King has been, these past few years, a miniature reflection of the national picture.

Mixed Reactions

King has had its student demands for an "all black faculty and administration" and its sympathy strikes for black college students who have been expelled from campuses in Wisconsin for alleged campus disruptions. Yet in the same semester, an interracial team of teachers at King sponsored a trip to Mexico for a group of its students who were members of the Spanish Club.

From this atmosphere of "all-black demands and focus" came these kinds of responses from students making the trip:

"I would not like to see an all-black faculty at King. Furthermore, I believe that we ought to get to know more people of other races and nations when we are in high

school. Because sooner or later we will have to have some dealings with them."

Yet the most pointed observation of all was made by the young woman who was chosen to study at Mexico's *Universidad Internacional* that summer and to live with a Mexican family. She learned that good citizenship—barring the incidentals of local custom—is the same for the Mexican, the Afro-American, and the other foreigners whom she met while at the university. She learned also that, though foreigners will lament the social injustices to which the Afro-American has been subject back home, they nevertheless will compete academically with him as though he had never been subject to educational deprivation.

Black parents realize that such is no less true with Americans back home as far as the realities and the competition of daily life are concerned. And realizing that scientific and technological advances have made a complete racial apartheid (even self-imposed) impossible in this nation, they are demanding that education for the black student prepare him for this competition.

Furthermore, at the root of the demands for control of their own community schools is a great deal of this thinking. It is beginning to influence the new directions in black studies programs. These programs are veering away from focus upon the past injustices heaped upon blacks, to preparing him with knowledge of his racial heritage so that he can take his stand beside other men, who also know about their own heritage, with a feeling of equality and dignity.

This forces many of us in elementary

and secondary education to take another look at how we are training black pupils. Many pupils who have graduated have then come back to visit and to reprimand us. They hold that we have been too permissive with them as far as scholarship and citizenship standards have been concerned. Contact with the real world in which they must live and compete is convincing them of this.

Therefore, central city education is at another crossroads. Professors Arthur D. Roberts and Thomas P. Weinland touched upon its source in their article "In Search of Humanity."¹

As we say our "mea culpas" in despair that black men have been the victims of great social wrong in this nation, are we trying to build a new society upon human identity rather than racial identity? Because this "higher level of existence," as they refer to it, will mean that education must accept the fact that black students will have to be handed the same academic challenges that other students are handed; beginning of course where we now find them and gradually but swiftly raising the standards.

If such is not the case, then society will be treated to the newer injustice of producing another generation of blacks who are not equipped educationally to compete with the social majority. And the latter instance will be far worse than the former!

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¹ Arthur D. Roberts and Thomas P. Weinland. "In Search of Humanity." *Educational Leadership* 28 (4): 364-68; January 1971.

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