

# Disguised Racism in Public Schools

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**T**HE public school has been for a long time an important institution for the improvement of the life-chances of the individual. The "American Dream" has often been realized through the educational system. For the white, suburban pupil, the school holds the key to affluence and success; on the other hand, unfortunately, for the Negro and other minority persons such as the Indians and Spanish Americans, and even for the poor white, the school has become a negative force by limiting their life-chances.

The school has most recently been described as institutional racist by the Negro and other minority groups. As the school fails to educate individuals equally well according to each's fullest potential, or equivocates and adjudges some individuals to be inherently inferior, or inferior because of environmental circumstances, it is prejudging, sorting, and limiting the life-chances of individuals on a non-equalitarian basis. This is institutional racism in the schools.

Two forms of prejudice are evidenced among individuals. *Open* prejudice is the pervasive attitude that others are inferior as judged upon the basis of race, color, or creed. Because these others are considered inferior, they should be separated from, shunned, and treated as inferiors. *Closed* prejudice is a more subtle form of the first, for in this

instance individuals utilize various institutions to act upon their prejudices.

The U.S. Riot Commission Report warns of the extent of this subtle prejudice as threatening the future of every American.

Race prejudice has shaped our history decisively, it now threatens to affect our future. . . . Pervasive discrimination and segregation in employment, education, and housing have resulted in the continuing exclusion of great numbers of Negroes from the benefits of economic progress.<sup>1</sup>

Institutional racism allows a cycle to come into effect: the institution says you are inferior, the individual is judged to be inferior, and the individual finally becomes inferior.

## Institutional Racism

Today, the public school serves as an example of the extent of institutional racism. The public school employs subtle racism in a host of ways, some of which are major concerns of this paper. First, the attitudes of teachers toward minority group pupils

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Riot Commission Report. "Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders." *New York Times*, 1968, p. 10.

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(stereotyping); second, the use of IQ tests; third, ability grouping; fourth, segregation; and fifth, the allocation of teachers.

### Teacher Attitudes

To the degree that testimonials and observations typify schooling in the Negro ghetto schools, books such as Jonathan Kozol's *Death at an Early Age*, James Herson's *The Way It Spozed To Be*, and Nat Hentoff's *Our Children Are Dying* testify to the dilapidated schools, the many teachers who exercise cruelty, prejudice, and ignorance toward the student body. Specifically, the teachers are unprepared for other than a middle class teaching situation, and are unwilling or unable to adjust to a culturally different environment. Subtle racism is indicated by some teachers; for example, the reading and art teachers in Kozol's book play favorites with the white pupils. The Negroes are called vulgar names behind their backs, and the tragic home life of many of the poor is disregarded.

The teacher's attitude is a crucial determinant of pupil behavior. Research has shown that individuals to a great extent react in kind to the stimulus being offered. Irvin Katz found that "Negro and lower class children perceive their teachers as rejectant" and "White middle class teachers do tend to underestimate the ability of minority children."<sup>2</sup> Generally, it has been found that about one-half of white teachers unconsciously act upon their cultural conditioning. In a study of Negro and white attitudes of ghetto pupils, more than half the white teachers described their students as "lazy," while only 19 percent of the black teachers did.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the Negro teachers expressed more satisfaction with their current ghetto teaching position, and thought the

educational system to be inadequate, while the white teachers were more critical of the Negro students and parents than of the educational system. Finally, teachers in the lowest socioeconomic status schools desire to move to a "better" school, and "more beginning teachers are assigned to schools of lower socioeconomic status."<sup>4</sup> This reaffirms the Gottlieb observation that Negro teachers tend to see Negro pupils as "happy," "energetic," and "fun-loving," while the white teachers would rather teach in a middle school to get away from pupils who are "talkative," "lazy," and "rebellious."<sup>5</sup>

It has been assumed by the school bureaucracy that Negroes have learning disabilities. This situation previously has been defined as cultural deprivation and has excused the schools (in their own eyes anyhow) from turning out successful learners. Especially do the Negro pupils, a vast majority of whom are lower class, soon learn that "Black" is a negative concept. Richard Larsen, studying 250 kindergarten pupils in two inner city schools, found that Negro five-year-olds identify themselves incorrectly by race; furthermore, "white children tend to assign positive roles to other white children and negative roles to Negro children."<sup>6</sup> Usually, these studies have been consistent in indicating that children in the primary grades prefer whites and reject Negroes, perceiving that Negro children are socially inferior.

### Use of IQ Tests

Perhaps one of the greatest hoaxes perpetrated upon the poor, Negroes, and some minority groups such as the Spanish Americans and Indians is that of IQ deficiency. It has often been assumed that these groups were inferior intellectually upon the basis of heredity. Hence the school, being only an environmental force, could do little if any-

<sup>2</sup> Irvin Katz. "Some Motivational Determinants of Racial Differences in Intellectual Achievement." In: Margaret Mead. *Science and the Concept of Race*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968. pp. 136 and 140.

<sup>3</sup> David Gottlieb. "Teaching and Students: Views of Negro and White Teachers." *Sociology of Education* 37: 345-53; Summer 1964.

<sup>4</sup> Robert E. Herriot and Nancy Hoyt St. John. *Social Class and the Urban School*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966. pp. 58 and 132.

<sup>5</sup> Gottlieb, *op. cit.*, p. 345.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Larsen et al. "Racism in Kindergarten?" *Elementary School Journal* 69: 181-82; January 1969.

thing to improve the students' intelligence. Thus, when one is economically poor in the dominant culture, one is apt to do poorly in the culturally determined IQ test. The Los Angeles and San Francisco school systems conducted investigations which indicated that Negroes often scored one standard deviation below the white population, specifically a difference of 85-95 averages for Negroes versus a 105 average for the white population. Therefore, Negroes were almost universally classified as slow learners—often considered by many teachers to be uneducable.

Almost automatically the self-fulfilling prophecy took place in which the teacher viewed the pupil as unteachable, the pupil perceived the teacher as not caring, and "giveupitis" took place. The IQ scores were often treated as absolutes, reflecting the ability to learn rather than cultural deprivation factors. For Negroes, who are especially limited traditionally in social and economic advantages, the IQ has been more an index of poverty and the lack of middle class advantages than anything else. The irony of using IQ tests is that so many teachers believe the scores to be self-predictors of achievement in school. The California study conducted over the past several years by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson indicates that primary grade teachers who were told their students were spurters led pupils to spurt, and teachers who were told specific pupils were slower learners actually retarded achievement of their pupils even though, unknown to the teachers, these pupils so designated were the opposite in learning abilities.<sup>7</sup>

### **Ability Grouping**

The close association between IQ tests and ability grouping is difficult to separate. Very often, IQ tests are utilized as the most significant factor in grouping, which means that most Negroes, being poor, will be grouped with other economically poor stu-

dents; poverty and cultural biases have been diagnosed as IQ test factors. Thus, school systems utilizing ability grouping (even though research has indicated little, if any, advantage of homogeneous grouping over heterogeneous grouping) tend to place students together more often for socioeconomic reasons than for any other reason. The degree of educational racism becomes great as Negroes bussed to white areas tend to be segregated again by ability grouping when IQ scores are utilized to justify separation for ability grouping.

Closely aligned with ability grouping is the guiding of "slower pupils" into noncollege, occupational, and vocational courses. Here, the assumption is that college is for those who do well in the junior high grades. Therefore, the early forced choice into an occupational track means the student in the ghetto and poor rural area is not likely to take foreign languages, advanced mathematics, chemistry, and science. Moreover, many of the required English and social studies courses may be "watered down" with the expectation that non-college bound students need not achieve more than a minimum level of knowledge. Thus, the student in the vocational programs soon learns that he is a second-class student in the school program.

### **Segregation**

Perhaps the most pervasive influence affecting Negro school success is that of segregation. We have dichotomized the educational system by segregation, wherein the large number of middle class whites go to an all-white school and the Negroes and other minority groups, being poor, attend ghetto schools. This type of institutionalized segregation leads to a continuation of separate and unequal education. The Coleman Report indicates that peer influence is the most significant factor (second is the teacher, and of least importance are the facilities and the curriculum) in affecting the amount of learning achievement. Thus, the public school has essentially continued the biases inherent in residential patterns of living and the work world separatism by granting pref-

<sup>7</sup> Robert Rosenthal and Lenore F. Jacobson. "Teacher Expectations for the Disadvantaged." *Scientific American* 218: 22; April 1968.

erential status to middle class whites in suburban schools and an inferior status to lower class whites, Negroes, and other minority groups.

### **Allocation of Teachers**

If good teachers, as the Coleman Report indicates, do make a difference in a learning situation, then one would assume that the best teachers would be utilized to teach those who are achieving most inadequately. On the contrary, evidence generally indicates that the best teachers in terms of degrees, experience, and principals' recommendations are found in the areas where the pupils with the highest socioeconomic status are present.

Kenneth Clark has noted that "Schools in deprived communities have a disproportionately high number of substitute and unlicensed teachers. Some of the classes in these schools have as many as ten or more different teachers in a single school year."<sup>8</sup> As the Negro becomes increasingly concentrated in the inner city ghettos, with bussing being rejected by the suburban communities, the ghetto child will most likely go to older, run-down, socioeconomically segregated schools.

### **Guidelines for a Solution**

Perhaps teachers are beginning to realize that their attitudes toward pupils are both a positive and negative force upon the pupils. Too often teachers have been reared in middle class homes where institutional racism was undiagnosed and have been educated in teacher education institutions which have no specific programs dealing with prejudice, racism, and related teaching techniques.

In the professional education sequence, teachers need to examine racism in all its subtle and open styles. Specifically, basic values underlying a democratic philosophy of educational opportunity need to be explored fully. With the growing movement toward pupil-accounting, the schools must

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Clark. *Dark Ghetto*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965. p. 138.

accept the challenge and achieve a more equal end product. For as Alvin Pitcher states the case, "Whenever an institution can be said to demonstrate or to represent inequality of results, so far as Black and white people are concerned, it is racist."<sup>9</sup>

Today, studies have confirmed the idea that values are correlative if not identical for people of designated levels of income; for example, honesty, sincerity, truthfulness, and specific aspirations to get a better education, be successful, and own a nice home are ranked similarly by all races and income levels.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the difference between classes is not one of aspiration; rather, it is that one's economic ability determines who shall have and who shall not. The educational system in many cases becomes the "great provider."

Teachers, principals, and school board members *must be informed* about the degree of institutional racism presently pervading the public school system. Thereafter, accountability and rectification of this problem need to become the first priority in providing equality of educational opportunity. It would appear logical for school systems to have an ombudsman available to sound out minority problems.

Such a quasi-legal person would have the power to take the school board, principal, and teachers to court as deemed necessary to promote needed changes. For without needed statutory changes, the school system will continue to operate in a context of institutional racism. As long as the institution is protected from individual pupil accountability, the individual teacher can explain away any pupil failure as the fault of the institutional and noninstitutional factors rather than admitting where the real blame lies, in his own biased attitude, lack of innovative teaching strategy, and personal incompetence. □

<sup>9</sup> Alvin Pitcher. "White Racism and Black Development." *Religious Education* 65: 85; March-April 1970.

<sup>10</sup> Milton Rokeach and Seymour Parker. "Values as Social Indicators of Poverty and Race Relations in America." *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* 388: 100; March 1970.

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