

# Changing Conceptions of Community

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THE controversy at the doorstep of Harlem's Intermediate School 201 in September 1966 was the beginning of a new definition of community as perceived by schools serving "minority group communities." Such schools had historically been perceived as being potential white schools. A "potential white school" is a white-controlled school located within a community in which Blacks/Puerto Ricans/Chicanos and other Spanish-speaking groups/Indians/Oriental are the majority and which values compulsory assimilation above cultural pluralism—a school whose members are treated as/perceived as/conditioned to be "outcasts."

## "The Outcasts"

The "outcasts"—as defined by skin, color, cultural identity, geographic residence, income, and white "institutional racism"—have been traditionally perceived as being members of pathological families and communities and as being devoid of any sense of psychological identity with their communities of residence. It was anticipated that students from "outcast" communities would naturally reject their families/communities and concern themselves only with their individual goals. The one by one highly selective entry of "outcasts" into the mainstream gave rise to the "Claude Brown (*Manchild in the*

*Promised Land*) Theory"—one could make it out of the ghetto on his own (without the benefits of white paternalism) only under great odds. Such a position is an expression of a preference for evacuating the ghetto rather than elevating it.

"Outcasts" were perceived as being "unqualified," "culturally deprived," "disadvantaged," in need of "preferential treatment," and "handicapped." The onus for the ills of such communities rested on *them*.

Unfortunately, many members of the Black/Chicano/Puerto Rican/Indian/Oriental/poor white communities perceived themselves in the same way until the controversy at I.S. 201. They believed that they could be more effectively educated in a white middle class-controlled setting; that education and democracy could be realized in this country under white middle class leadership alone.

## The Cadre of Articulate Spokesmen

What really happened at Harlem's I.S. 201 was a shift within the Black community from the position of *aggrieved complainant* to that of the *articulate spokesman* on behalf of one's own interest. Albeit a small cadre

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of people, those who began the movement did so out of the recognition that a community had to be in control of its own self-determination; that a community could not have its autonomy legislated, it had to be activated/actualized/realized.

This cadre came to believe that the struggle was political, not just educational: that a direct relationship existed between educating students to think for themselves and educating for social responsibility. One's conscience, not his slide rule or his ability to add, was to become his guide. This group recognized that problems of Blacks/Puerto Ricans/Chicanos/Indians/Oriental/poor whites had little to do with their ability to read. In fact, their essential problems may have stemmed from the fact that they read the society's double-talk all too well.

This cadre also came to recognize that parent/community involvement in decision making/problem solving/curriculum development/humanization/enculturation/building community support was more than a privilege or a right. It was an *absolute necessity* as a prerequisite for educating for self-reliance and self-determination.

A third recognition was the reality of scientific colonialism that bedeviled the school system. Track systems, testing procedures, teacher recruitment, selection and evaluation procedures, curriculum development, suspension procedures, and the like made consumers targets of the school system's hostility. White teachers who were actually afraid of Black people designed educational programs to tame the students so as to enable the teachers to manage their fears. Parents were ignored; students were educated to reject their families and their communities, to become bodyguards for white people against the potential violence of Black people.

The cadre of articulate spokesmen recognized the need to engage parent/community leaders in defining their own educational program. Several schools outlawed corporal

punishment as an educational tool. Others forbade legal suspensions—and sought to consider how to reeducate teachers to relate social behavior and academic behavior to their own capabilities as people and teachers. Efforts also began to involve such schools in evaluating themselves. The function of the evaluation was not to judge but to learn how to improve. The essential thrust was to educate students to refuse to participate in their own oppression. From a positive enacting perspective, this cadre sought to learn how to develop Malcolm X's, Martin Luther King's, and Nat Turner's right in the classroom.

Finally, this cadre came to recognize that professionals had to function as *members* of the communities they came to serve. They had to be *psychologically identified* with the legitimate rights and interests of the students. Such a perspective committed them to recognize the need to develop and transmit a new set of *values* and *goals*. Part and parcel of this concern was the need to develop models that were *transportable*, *translatable*, and *easily introduced* into the fabric of the selected community. The cadre, then, had to become a social movement engaged in the exchange of ideas, information, expertise, and the like.

That this cadre's influence has begun to have a national impact is evident in the following:

1. Nine Black school systems are now in existence; eight were formed since the I.S. 201 unfolded in 1966.<sup>1</sup>
2. At last count, there were over 80 independent Black educational institutional alternatives to public school miseducation.<sup>2</sup> Their major weakness is that they have become alternative "educational" institutions and not

<sup>1</sup> *Roster of Black School Systems*. Harlem, New York: Afram Associates, Inc., October 16, 1971. 1 p.

<sup>2</sup> "The Rise of Independent Black Educational Institutions." *Imani*, August/September 1971. (Entire edition.)

alternative political institutions. Some are isolated from the communities in which they are located; few have had any impact on the public school systems which their students abandoned.

3. Black Studies programs on white college campuses adopted the model thrust forward at Harlem's I.S. 201. At last count, Afram's Action Library had a list of 217 such programs.<sup>3</sup> Such programs are encouraging Black students to study on white college campuses as members of the Black community. Second, they are being urged to apply their minds to the solution of culturally specific problems imposed on Black communities as a direct consequence of white institutional racism.

4. Black Urban Alliances—federations of community-based Black organizations—have been developed within a growing number of Black communities to ensure that a process is developed to guarantee that decisions affecting the Black community are made by the Black community.<sup>4</sup>

5. A growing number of national Black organizations and caucuses with national white-controlled organizations have arisen over the past few years.<sup>5</sup>

The movement, then, at Harlem's I.S. 201 to engage the community in defining itself, governing itself, and defending itself against negative influences from outside itself has stimulated a shift of behavior as it relates to the concept of community. It was a recognition of the need to engage communities in struggling against their own tendencies to be "divided and conquered" that Afram has carried into its work with Follow Through parents.

Afram's involvement in the Follow Through program has provided this organization with an opportunity to actualize some of its concerns and to learn from parents how best to provide assistance to them. More important, it has provided Afram with a rare opportunity to understand and formulate its own concept of community.

<sup>3</sup> Available Mailing Lists. Harlem, New York: Afram Associates, Inc., December 17, 1971. p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Directory of Black Urban Alliances. Harlem, New York: Afram Associates, Inc., February 1972.

<sup>5</sup> Charles L. Sanders and Linda McLean. Directory of National Black Organizations. Harlem, New York: Afram Associates, Inc., February 1972.

## The Follow Through School System

I have functioned as project administrator of a federally funded program conducted by Afram Associates, Inc. The program is funded by the Follow Through Branch, Division of Compensatory Education, U.S. Office of Education. Afram perceives itself as being an integral part of the Follow Through School System involving 178 projects, 20 educational sponsors, and 70,000 children.

Afram provides service to nine Parent Implemented Programs located in nine cities in six states (Boston; Atlantic City; Scott and College Station, Arkansas; New York City; East St. Louis; Flint and Alcona, Michigan; and Washington, D.C.). A total of 3,000 children are served: 86 percent Black; 8 percent white, 4 percent Spanish-speaking, and 1.5 percent other.<sup>6</sup>

Afram is one of 20 sponsors whose services can be made available to various communities at their own request.<sup>7</sup> While the majority of the educational sponsors are engaged in *classroom instructional issues*, Mamis identified 10 strategies which they utilized in involving parents within their programs. She categorized the strategies as being designed to *reinforce* the aims of the sponsors or to engage the parents in *self-development* activities.

The Parent Implementation Follow Through Model recognized the *necessity* for parental decision making and problem solving. Parent participation is not viewed as a mere privilege or as a legal right. Rather, it is perceived as a natural right, non-negotiable in form, in which the love and security offered by parents are consciously perceived

<sup>6</sup> Proposals available via Afram Associates, Inc., 68-72 East 131st Street, Harlem, New York 10027. *Planning for Parent Participation in Follow Through Project*, January 1970-February 28, 1970. December 1969. 3 pp.; *Parent Participation in Follow Through*, June 26, 1970-June 25, 1971. June 1970. 16 pp.; *Parent Participation in Follow Through*, June 21, 1971-June 30, 1972. June 9, 1971. 60 pp.

<sup>7</sup> *Promising Approaches to Early Childhood Education, School Year, 1970-71*. Washington, D.C.: Follow Through Branch, U.S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1971. 26 pp.

as being a learning tool. The upbringing skills (social development and cultural) are similarly perceived as being defined by the parents/community and not the school staff alone. Educational achievement is examined in the context of the natural contributions which parents make to the learning process.<sup>8</sup> Afram believes that this achievement cannot be measured as being separate from parent involvement/decision making.

In providing its services, Afram has used the following five guidelines:

1. The parents are its primary consumers; Afram is in the service of the parents. This does not mean that the other project staff are any less important. It merely means that the PAC Chairman is Afram's essential link to each site, followed by the Advisory Committee member, the parents, and the Local Stimulator.

2. The measurement of its effectiveness relates to the degree to which parents make decisions which express their own ideas and interests.

3. Afram does not consider that it has the answers; it is seeking ways to uncover them.

4. Afram does not have an agenda other than that of enabling parents to develop their own.

5. Afram seeks to prevent PACs from being "divided and conquered," it addresses its attention to enabling PACs to resolve their own internal conflicts.<sup>9</sup>

Of the nine programs with which Afram is affiliated, six also receive the services of one of the following educational sponsors: the Nongraded Model developed by Mary Christian at Hampton Institute, the Englemann-Becker model, and the Educational Development Center. While these sponsors

are concerned essentially with that which goes on within the classroom, Afram attempts to guard the necessities of parental involvement (decision making, definition making, evaluation, and the like) and to help to equip them with the requisite skills to carry out their responsibilities. Some sponsors tend to separate instruction and parent involvement into two separate components; Afram perceives instructional/parent involvement as a singular concept.

Another component of the Parent Implementation Model is the utilization of parents as paid staff, as agents of the parents—and not as mere extensions of the program. Such staff members are urged to function out of their homes; to bring the community to the school; to relate the constituencies to their duly elected bodies, and to encourage the development of leadership actions in others. This role is distinguished from that of the traditional Parent Workers whose task is to take the school to the community, to carry out the will of the duly elected body, and to exercise leadership themselves.<sup>10</sup>

An important aspect of this role is that the school becomes an extension of the home and community and not a substitute for it. This role begins to be perceived as existing because the community exists—and not vice versa. Parents visit the school to engage in problem solving and not just to have problems solved. They begin to behave/feel/think as though the school belongs to them. They are expunged of the feeling of being "tenants" in a building where the professionals are the "landlords."

The prison pallor of the school is replaced by an environment of warmth and security. The classroom becomes the family group; the teacher becomes a mother figure; the children become friends and not just classmates. They teach and learn from each other.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Role of the Local Stimulator*. Harlem, New York: Afram Associates, Inc., October 26, 1970. 2 pp.; *Thought Stimulator #144: Evaluation of Local Stimulators*. Harlem, New York: Afram Associates, Inc., May 17, 1971. 1 p.

<sup>11</sup> *An Idea: A Family Assignment*. (Revised edition.) Harlem, New York: Afram Associates, Inc., October 26, 1971. 2 pp.

<sup>8</sup> *Questionnaire Action Stimulator #34A. A Questionnaire: Parents as Teachers*. Harlem, New York: Afram Associates, Inc., September 27, 1971. 2 pp.

<sup>9</sup> *What Is Parent Implementation: Toward a Definition, The Afram Interpretation*. Harlem, New York: Afram Associates, Inc., September 12, 1971. p. 7. The term "consumers" is now being replaced by the term "needs assessors." The Local Stimulator is a parent who is selected by peers and paid by Afram to provide services locally.

## New Concepts

The experiences from I.S. 201 and the learnings from the Follow Through experience have shaped the Afram concept of community. The struggle has proved to be educational in that there is a growing awareness of the responsibility of Black communities to ensure that their own children are perceived as being human and educable. Parent groups are increasingly developing and codifying ways and means to ascertain whether in fact the teachers are free enough to regard their children with respect: the Parent Board of the Pulaski County Special School District's Follow Through Program developed and conducted a questionnaire in order to get at this question.<sup>12</sup> The Highland Park Free School described its concerns about evaluation as follows:

It is our feeling that a child's self-image, sense of community, relationship to his peers and community are as important as, if not more important than, the skills tested by standard measurements. It is hard to measure a child's lack of fear of his teacher, the school structure and his feeling of love, trust, and respect for his total environment.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *A Questionnaire: Teacher, Teacher Aide, Administration*. Little Rock, Arkansas: Project Follow Through, Pulaski County Special School District, May 1971. 3 pp. (Also available through Afram.)

<sup>13</sup> *Thought Stimulator #135. Highland Park Free School's Process of Self-Evaluation*. Harlem, New York: Afram Associates, Inc., June 1971. 1 p.

An extension of this concept is the increasing recognition of the student as a member of a family and as part of a community. The student rosters at the Massachusetts Experimental School System, the Highland Park Free School, the Roxbury Community School, the East Harlem Block Nursery School, and the Morgan Community School are organized along family lines. Rather than listing the students as individuals, they are listed along with siblings under family names and addresses.<sup>14</sup>

These new developments derive from a deepening perception by parents of both their skills and rights as these relate to parent implementation of educational programs. One parent was quoted as follows:

I've come to realize that as a parent I know more about my children than anyone else. I know what they like and what they don't like. I know what they can do and cannot do. I teach my children and they learn from me in many different ways.<sup>15</sup>

The advent of parent involvement has provided for the student learner a place of prominence in the educational process. While professionals—teachers/administrators/specialists—are interested in the student

<sup>14</sup> Morgan Parent Council. *Parent Directory: Follow Through Teams*. Washington, D.C.: Morgan Community Schools, April 3, 1971. 20 pp.

<sup>15</sup> Doris Beasley, Chairman, Parent Board, Follow Through Program, Pulaski County Special School District, August 10, 1971.

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as a "here and now" learner, parents supplement this interest with one that embodies their own futures, expressed in terms of their interest in the future of their own children. Parents link the "here and now" to the here-after. Most teachers are concerned about how a child does on the last day of the semester in which the child is in the class.<sup>16</sup>

This concern for the child has been enhanced by the variable of the selection and hiring of "paraprofessionals" by the parents rather than by the school system. Paraprofessionals hired by the school system usually become overt advocates for the system even if they are covert advocates for the children.

The Parent Implementation Model of Follow Through Programs guards the right of parents to select and hire the staff.<sup>17</sup> Hence such staff members feel accountable to the parents despite the source of the funds. As local residents, they are integral parts of the local community and must answer accordingly.

The introduction of parents to the educational process as *full partners* has in a sense fostered the development of a new educational construct. It is that concept and their development of the freedom instinctively to advocate on behalf of children that shaped a new concept of community. Next to the children themselves, parents have the greatest vested interests in the education of their own children. What they have learned is that the people to whom they entrusted the education of their children were protecting their own vested interests and not that of the children.

Afram's role has been essentially that of guarding the necessity of parental involvement, and assisting parents in acquiring the skills/talents/desire/resources to express their own interests. To do so, Afram's staff members have functioned as "members" of the host communities: "naturalized citizens,"

<sup>16</sup> Preston Wilcox. *One Time Around*. Harlem, New York: Afram Associates, Inc., August 28, 1970. 2 pp.

<sup>17</sup> Pat S. Watts. *Letter to Yvonne Woodall*. Washington, D.C.: Follow Through Program, U.S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, November 19, 1970. 3 pp.

if you will, who are psychologically identified with the interests of such communities.

Afram's special input, however, is, in a sense, to link each local project to other projects, and to engage them in a common effort with a larger community. It was this awareness that sensitized the Afram staff to assist parent/school communities in developing an effective working relationship with a larger community of which the parents and schools are only a part. The Federation of Boston Community Schools, of which three schools are a part, is a case in point.<sup>18</sup> The Education Committee of the Dayton Model Cities Planning Council is another. It was involved in developing parent leadership in 11 Dayton Schools serving less chance communities.<sup>19</sup>

The lessons learned are that the school must become a part of the local community before it can be influenced/shaped/modified. The local community must develop a sense of community before it can influence a school. The community must assign to a segment of itself the responsibility for ensuring that the school is an instrument of the community and not of the district school board or system. That responsibility rests with families, not individuals; parents, not teachers; supportive community groups and not the school system.

That recognition/learning makes it possible for Afram to enable other communities to begin to build a sense of community *on their own terms* because it knows that no one can build a community for anyone other than himself. And if he has ever been involved in having someone manage his own community, he knows of the tendency of outsiders to produce "outcasts"—and hence to divide one's community. □

<sup>18</sup> Federation of Boston Community Schools, 76 Highland Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02119.

<sup>19</sup> Ruth W. Burgin and Arthur E. Thomas. *An Evaluation of the Dayton Experience: An Experiment in Community School Control*. Wilberforce, Ohio: Institute for Research and Development in Urban Areas, Central State University, 1971. 139 pp.; Ruth W. Burgin. *Community School Council: Philosophy and Framework for Urban Educational Change*. Wilberforce, Ohio: Institute for Research and Development in Urban Areas, Central State University, 1971. 36 pp.

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