

Needed: Personalized

MOST Americans rarely conceptualize *blacks*. But they know *the black*—that symbol of all blacks characteristically perceived as different from and inferior to “normal” human beings. *The black child* in elementary school, for example, is often perceived as a fatherless, deprived dunce illegitimately birthed by a debased welfare cheat determined to overpopulate and overpollute her alien Earth.

Notable exceptions and contrary protestations aside, perhaps nowhere is such an imagery of *the black child* more pervasive and more capable of inflicting permanent harm than when housed in the minds of elementary school personnel. Most of the public and private elementary schools are, in fact, racially desegregated, but very few are actually integrated; and we must remain cognizant of the profound distinctions between desegregation and integration. The former involves a move away from segregation and can be accomplished by merely adding “color” to the school. The latter cannot operate in atmospheres where negative images of blacks prevail. It can only flourish where there is a sincerity to act. That sincerity must involve respect for blacks.

Those Most Victimized

Racial protests and conflicts centered around education during the past several decades have taught us much. After all, they have taught us that racially segregated schools have, in fact, not been replaced by

racially integrated schools, and that, even in racially desegregated schools, the image of *the black child* remains dominant. Those most victimized still are powerless black children and their parents. The extent to which such victimization occurs is a function of a number of variables, not the least of which are socioeconomic status of the blacks involved in such situations and the racial composition of the administrative and teaching personnel of the schools.

We—a black mother and daughter—make bare a part of our souls here because we believe that we must learn from the past, that candles must light our present darkness. Among the many experiential phenomena we have shared—sometimes frustratingly, sometimes joyfully—are those involving us both in formal educational processes. We shall draw briefly upon particular instances in a private elementary school located in the South to put before you selected conflicts from our experiences which suggest the need for more personalized modes of learning in our elementary schools. We shall not dwell upon our coping mechanisms because we believe it is of utmost importance to highlight problems which we may share with certain other parent-child pairs like us.

Demographically our female parent-child dyad contains a very busy adult (gainfully employed full-time as a professional worker, a mother, a father, and an active member of various professional and civic organizations) and a child (now eight years old, gainfully engaged as a student, a child,

Modes of Learning

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a companion, and a playmate) whose life style is clearly middle class, representing a continuation of the life styles of our parents/grandparents and grandparents/great grandparents before us.

Race aside, the adult member of this dyad occupies a higher prestige level in education, occupation, and income than most, if not all, of the personnel employed at the school attended by the child. This fact, over the past year, may have been a serious, underlying source of our conflict—a source not openly acknowledged but surfacing, we think, in “unconscious slights” in our dyad-school interactions. “Unconscious slights” are those “put-downs” which may not be actually intended by the senders of communicative messages but which, nevertheless, constitute the messages “sent” since the senders rarely consider the impact of their messages upon the intended receivers.

For example, in one parent-teacher exchange where the parent was attempting to clarify a situation of some concern to the child, the teacher indicated to the parent that she could understand “because I came from a poor family *too*.” When challenged about this misconception of the dyad, the teacher’s response was to inquire about the health of the child—“Does she have cerebral palsy?” When informed that the child was not so afflicted, the teacher indicated that she thought she was because she could tell that the child (whose measured IQ a few years ago was about 127) was incapable of grasping any concepts.

The Insecure Teacher

In retrospect, it appeared that the teacher herself was highly insecure in the situation. New, with no previous teaching experience and no degree in elementary education, she was also black—an extreme minority on the teaching staff. The lower-school head teacher—also black and new—was not able, in our judgment, to deal sufficiently with the developing situation for two basic reasons. One was her attempt to deny the transactions between the parent and the teacher—where the child was also present. That is, the teacher did not actually express herself as the mother heard her (although some months later the teacher herself admitted to the mother that she did). The second was the head teacher’s attempt to change the meaning of the transactions by “unconscious slights” of the mother. For example, she indicated that the reason the mother’s note to the teacher prior to the visit had been ignored was that the note contained “too many big words.”

Without providing any more illustrations, let us stress our belief that personalized modes of learning did operate throughout these varying situations; for the child, at least, learned much about power, nepotism, and race. She learned especially that in conflicting situations, too often, the school per-

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sonnel tend quickly to place blame upon the child. In sophisticated settings, school personnel tend to diagnose black children who do not fit their image of the *black child* as being in need of psychiatric care. In less sophisticated settings, they tend to define them as "bad" children, thus helping to set in motion a chain of actions often detrimental to the child unless he has a parent(s) strong enough to intervene.

In our own case, the failure to move beyond confrontation was due partially to the failure to resolve our differences, since, in conferences, the most persistent efforts were made to deny what we perceived as reality. In other words, "the meaning of the situation" to all of the participants was not considered, as if parents and children somehow are not capable of defining their situations or, if they are, existing school systems rarely consider them as so. Our situation was complicated by race as well, and the typical reaction on the part of the school was to suggest that it was "colorblind." Our belief is that race is real and must be recognized as real.

Desegregation Is Not Integration

In comparing our case with similar ones found among parent-child dyads in other states, we found a tendency to try to place too much informality in what really is a

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very formal setting. We found some teachers who prefer to address parents by their first names, even though the teachers and parents are not social acquaintances, and even though many parents prefer being addressed formally in formal settings when they do not actually *know* the other participants in their transactions.

We concluded that we must move toward personalized modes of learning in desegregated elementary schools. We suggest that such schools examine themselves to determine the extent to which they may actually practice racism, and that they recognize that desegregation is not integration. In dealing with black children especially, we believe it is urgent that the rights of children, parents, and teachers be clarified and respected, and that existing attitudes should be modified to recognize parents as a part of the "team."

We sense the need for less informality and more formality within many school settings. We also sense the need for greater concentration upon teachers' teaching children the basic skills and knowledge as a first priority; and, in this respect, we concur with Kenneth Clark's cogent comments upon crises in the schools.

We wish to stress most that many black children are acutely conscious of their reception in a classroom situation. They and their parents should help the school to see the kind of atmosphere—the highly personalized atmosphere—in which the child believes himself to be located. Only when the feelings of the child are also considered can we begin to move toward respect for each child. Only when we are more honest about teacher impact upon a pupil can we move toward a better determination of an ideal teacher for a black child in a desegregated school.

In the final analysis, that ideal teacher will not be determined by race, but by the teacher's own security and competence, by his or her own ability to transmit effectively that security and competence to pupils, and by his or her own ability to respect the parents of those children. Presently, there is no room in desegregated schools for black or white insecure, inexperienced teachers. □

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