

# Compensatory

**F**ROM its conception, America's educational system was never designed to meet the needs of a multiethnic society. Its primary role and function have always been and continue to be geared to meeting and fulfilling the educational needs of the middle class white Anglo-Saxon majority of this country.

Children of minority groups were not, at the early stages of the educational system's development, given any consideration. Therefore, only the rare, gifted, or *unusually* talented among the minorities benefited from the educational system. One might say the "survival of the fittest" theory was applicable to minority children. Also, for centuries, the philosophical, psychological, sociological, and other determinants of curriculum changes and alterations have consistently focused on and catered to this majority group, excluding minority groups entirely.

The minorities referred to are the Americans who have not been allowed to share in the wealth and growth of this country, the groups for whom justice has indeed been denied: The American Indians who have always been herded aside to barren reservations without any real concern for their education. The Appalachian poor whites who are eking out an existence in deprived rural communities. The Puerto Ricans who have been allowed in the country and forced into

ghettos. The migrant Mexican American workers who are exploited throughout the Southwest. The Black Americans who occupy a unique position as a minority, having survived the system of slavery and the era of segregation.

Black Americans' desire for a better education has perhaps been one of the greatest catalysts for change in the educational system. *Brown vs. The Board of Education* prompted the U.S. Supreme Court's seminal decision outlawing racial segregation in public schools on May 17, 1954. A year later, May 31, 1955, the Court instructed the offending states to desegregate "at the earliest practicable date" and "with all deliberate speed." Following these mandates, school systems throughout the country (North, South, East, and West) could no longer defend the educational system of separate but equal. Unitary systems became the order of the day.

### **"The Great Panacea"**

The 1960's suddenly brought into existence a vast awareness in American education that a large number of children enrolled in public schools were being ill-served. Terminology such as "culturally deprived," "socially denied," "socially and educationally disadvantaged" became the labels applied to Blacks,

# Education? No!

B. L. MAXWELL\*

Puerto Ricans, poor Appalachian whites, Mexican and Indian Americans who were not able to benefit from an educational system designed for a middle class society.

To combat this "sudden" malady, compensatory education became the great panacea of the day. In the State of Illinois compensatory education was defined in the school code as "a program of instruction and services, supplementary to the regular public school program, for educationally disadvantaged children including those enrolled in school, those who have dropped out of school before graduation, and those who have not yet entered the first grade."

The federal government and private foundations stimulated the growth of compensatory education. Programs designed to overcome the deficits of these minority groups became the "Paradox with a Promise." Most programs were indeed efforts to fit the "square pegs" into the round holes of America's educational system.

The great hopes and aspirations for the effectiveness of compensatory education were short lived as research began to reveal that for the most part these programs had not been able to achieve the desired results on a massive basis.

• Studies of preschool compensatory programs by Deutsch reported positive results, but

the early gains diminished when youngsters entered first grade.

• Wolff and Stein concluded that the children showed greater readiness, but no educational gains were apparent.

If young children are to develop and reach a stage of self-actualization, then one must look at Maslow's hierarchy of needs and question whether children of minority groups are getting these needs fulfilled. Above and beyond physiological needs, safety, and security, Maslow suggests love and belonging, self-esteem, and finally self-actualization.

Is compensatory education the answer for the following: Can a background of poverty fulfill the total physiological needs? What about malnutrition and learning? Can a life in ghettos provide the safety and security needed for development? What happens to self-esteem when the square peg arrives at the round hole (school) and is immediately labeled and placed in a compensatory program with heavy emphasis on reading and language development? What happens to self-esteem when the square peg meets the middle class teacher whose middle class

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value system rejects all values different from those held by the teacher?

An exhaustive study by Gordon and Wilkerson revealed that compensatory education programs did not contain anything really new or innovative in education. Furthermore, compensatory programs such as Projects Aspire, Hope, Outward Bound, Outreach, and many others have for the most part been "one shot" deals and cannot really effect meaningful change. The most basic conclusion that can be drawn from many of the efforts of compensatory education programs is that they have not achieved viable results and in some parts of this country have become efforts on the part of some school systems to circumvent the 1954 Desegregation Act.

Compensatory education at its best is merely iodine being used to cure cancer. The problems of America's social, political,

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and educational systems are far too mammoth to be placated by this feeble effort.

## A Reordering of Priorities

If this society is truly committed to the concept of democracy, then there must be a reordering of priorities:

- Children's welfare must become the first concern of the entire citizenry.
- All children must have an equal opportunity for quality education.
- Minority students must be accepted as human beings from unique and significant cultures rather than odd and queer species to be dissected, studied, and labeled by middle class and often racist researchers.
- There must be an acceptance of diverse cultures as essential for developing an educational system that will utilize and not negate those who are different—whereby all will share in meaningful learning experiences.
- Social and political power must be re-ordered to eliminate the struggle between haves and have nots.
- Educators must harness all the brainpower available to revolutionize the archaic educational system and make it truly multiethnic in nature.

These are, one might conclude, rather idealistic challenges. Yet until the citizens and educators of America develop the kind of commitment necessary for change, all of the compensatory programs now in operation, those yet to be developed, and the ones not yet conceptualized will not bring into fruition the kind of educational institutions necessary for this changing society.

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