

A Carrot in a Pot of Water Is Not Vegetable Soup.

Racism in School and Society

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IT WOULD be comforting to most of us to be able to point a finger and declare, "Racism in the schools is *your* problem, not mine." Unfortunately, none of us can—in all honesty—do this; for if we are not the perpetrators of racism, we are its supporters, active and tacit, and its victims.

Racism is deeply rooted in the political and social history of the American people. Article I of the U.S. Constitution declared that representation in the House of Representatives should be based on a population count of the "Whole Number of Free Persons . . . excluding Indians" and "three fifths of all other persons." Even the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution did very little to stop racism. Racism became and is an institution in this country.

Institutions, as defined in the language of sociology, may be groups or social practices which tend to serve broad (as opposed to narrow) interests, and do so in ways which are both accepted and enduring. Institutionalization is thus the process by which unstable or loosely patterned actions are socially integrated to form orderly stable social structures.¹ Racism as an institution

¹ The definitions of institutions and institutionalization are adapted from those used by Leonard Broom and Phillip Selznick in *Sociology*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973.

"Elimination of racism in schools will occur only after or in concert with the elimination of racism in the U.S. Elimination of racism in this country will not occur until the laws passed to eliminate it are enforced."

did not always exist in this country, but has now been so thoroughly integrated into our social fabric that many people, particularly those who are not its victims, fail to recognize some of the guises it assumes.

Formalization is a part of the institutionalization process. Our nation's founders, by putting into words the belief that slaves were not full persons, thus giving formal recognition and acceptance to the idea that some races were better than others, were among those who helped to institutionalize racism in American society.

Schools Have Helped To Increase Racism

Once a social practice becomes formalized, those who have an interest in its main-

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tenance tend to take steps to conserve it. Laws, as a product of formalization, were not sufficient to enforce racism; if a social practice is to become institutionalized, it must be integrated into the personal value systems of those who will enforce and perpetuate it. The public schools provided an excellent vehicle for this part of the institutionalization process.

The schools became very important in the institutionalization of racism because they provided the opportunity to continually and systematically teach the concepts necessary to maintain racism. Some of this teaching process was quite direct, such as the use of racially biased textbooks and the general lack of minority teachers and administrators. Other parts of this process were less obvious, such as the misuse of testing materials to inaccurately and unjustly label and classify students.



"Rarely is busing opposed when it takes white children to white schools and black children to black schools."

School textbooks served as a major vehicle for transmitting racial hatred and superiority. The most cursory examination of 18th and 19th century American textbooks will point out how they were carriers of racism. The following quotation taken from a 19th century primary grade textbook provides a typical example:

God is the creative process: He first made the black man, realized He had done badly, and then created successively lighter races, improving as He went along. To the white man He gave a box of books and papers, to the black a box of tools so that he could "work for the white and red man, which he continued to do."²

Today, racism in textbooks still exists. The only difference between the racism in 20th century text materials and that in 18th and 19th century text materials is that it is less overt. In 1970, Michael Kane made a study of minorities in textbooks.³ He noted that while the position of blacks in contemporary society is no longer ignored, textbook treatment of the role of minorities in the United States continues to be weak and non-committal; complacent generalities continue to substitute for hard facts. Historical references to Native Americans have improved, but the textbook portrayal of Native Americans in contemporary society is still either missing or inaccurate. Kane also found that there has been little improvement in the textbook treatment of Asian Americans and that very little attention is even paid to Spanish-speaking Americans.

Teachers Do Not Represent Minorities

The patterns of employment of minority teachers point out how schools are used as instruments for racism. A 1975 statistical report on conditions in education provides recent information on the minority-pupil/minority-teacher ratio by states. The data show a significant gap between the number

² Ruther Miller Elson. *Guardians of Tradition*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1964. p. 88.

³ Michael B. Kane. *Minorities in Textbooks*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970.

of minority students in the schools and the number of minority teachers. Consider the following examples from the report:

State	Percent of School Population	
	Minority students	Minority teachers
Arizona	29.1	7.6
California	29.2	10.8
New Jersey	21.3	8.4
New York	26.6	5.6 ⁴

The institutionalization of racism in American schools sustains itself in an intriguing variety of ways. For instance, many schools utilize methods and techniques to classify, label, and place minority students in classes that do irreparable harm to their self-concept and ability to achieve academically.

Lawyers representing minority group clients are successfully arguing in courts that the present placement procedure violates the rights of minority children. They are arguing that the instruments used to classify and place students are racially biased and as a result minority group students are being unfairly and inaccurately placed. Support for this argument is borne out in many research studies. For instance, in 1968 Dunn stated that well over half of the children enrolled in this country's special education classes were members of minority groups:

... there are approximately 32,000 teachers of the retarded employed by local school systems—over one-third of all special educators in the nation. In my best judgment, about 60 to 80 percent of the pupils taught by these teachers are children from low status backgrounds—including Afro-Americans, American Indians, Mexicans, and Puerto Rican Americans.⁵

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics, Education Division, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. *The Condition of Education: A Statistical Report on the Condition of American Education 1975*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975. p. 71.

⁵ L. M. Dunn. "Special Education for the Mildly Retarded—Is Much of It Justifiable?" *Exceptional Children* 35:6; September 1968. Copyrighted by The Council for Exceptional Children, 1968. Reproduced with permission.

Toward Eliminating the Racism We Have Wrought

Laws have been changing so that racism is no longer a formal part of our society, but an institution cannot be abolished merely by changing laws. In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court, in rendering its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, declared school segregation illegal; yet today we are still confronted with scenes of angry parents who refuse to comply with court-ordered school desegregation plans. The Court's decision in *Lau v. Nichols* that children who are unable to effectively participate in English are entitled to special language instruction is also not being implemented with all deliberate speed (see box on p. 187).

Just as we could not stop the consumption of alcohol by enacting the Eighteenth Amendment, neither can we eliminate racism by merely changing old laws. Neither morality nor attitudes can be altered merely by legislative, executive, or judicial fiat. One of the most vivid reminders of this vis-à-vis racism is the continuing struggle to enforce court-ordered busing to eliminate school segregation. A stark reminder that racism is at the root of the resistance to court-ordered busing is the statement in a recent report by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund that, "It's not the distance, it's the niggers."⁶ Rarely is busing opposed when it takes white children to white schools and black children to black schools.

Other areas of support for racism in the schools that must be attacked are in the areas of teaching faculty and staff, curriculum, and instructional materials. The teaching faculty and staff of schools must be composed of members of different ethnic groups. The diversity in ethnic group representation must be visible at all levels of policy and decision making. Historically this has not been so and even presently this is not so. A position paper prepared by the Recruitment and Leadership Training Institute, "Minority

⁶ Quoted by Marian Wright Edelman in an interview with Margie Casady. "We Must Combat the Myth That We Are a Child-Centered Society." *Psychology Today*, June 1975, p. 65.

Supreme Court Decision, Lau v. Nichols

Kinney Kimmon LAU, a minor by and through Mrs. Kam Wai Lau, his guardian ad litem, et al., Petitioners

v.

Alan H. NICHOLS et al.
No. 72-6520

Argued Dec. 10, 1973

Decided Jan. 21, 1974

Action by students of Chinese ancestry who do not speak English for relief against alleged unequal educational opportunities in that they do not receive courses in the English language. The United States District Court for the Northern District of California denied relief and plaintiffs appealed. The United States Circuit, 483 F.2d 791, affirmed, and certiorari was granted. The Supreme Court, Mr. Justice Douglas, held that the school system's failure to provide English language instruction denied meaningful opportunity to participate in the public educational program in violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Reversed.

Mr. Justice White concurred in the result. Mr. Justice Stewart filed an opinion

concurring in the result, in which Mr. Chief Justice Burger and Mr. Justice Blackmun joined; Mr. Justice Blackmun filed an opinion concurring in the result, in which Mr. Chief Justice Burger joined.

In effect, the court found that the failure of the San Francisco school system to provide English language instruction to approximately 1800 students of Chinese ancestry who do not speak English denies them a meaningful opportunity to participate in the public educational program. This failure violates Section 601 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which bans discrimination based "on the ground of race, color, or national origin," in "any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance," and the implementing regulations of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

The Supreme Court found that:

Simple justice requires that public funds, to which all taxpayers of all races contribute, not be spent in any fashion which encourages, entrenches, subsidizes, or results in racial discrimination.

We accordingly reverse the judgment of the Court of Appeals and remand the case for the fashioning of appropriate relief."

ties in Policy-Making Positions in Public Education," provides important but disquieting data on this issue:

In the school districts included in this report, most of the minority-related positions were created and staffed during the past six years and most members of minority groups are concentrated in minority-related positions or non-traditional staff positions. Members of minority groups who hold major policy-making positions have been in their positions no more than six years. More than 70% have held their positions three years or less.⁷

In the Conclusion and Recommendation section of this report the following is suggested:

If the conditions of minorities are to change in this country, many more minority educational administrators must be included in the decision-making process regarding matters

⁷ "Minorities in Policy-Making Positions in Public Education." Philadelphia: Temple University, Recruitment and Leadership Training Institute, 1974. p. 36.

that relate to minority students. The influence, prestige, and power of minority administrators must be increased so that they may become participants in the decision-making process, not objects of it.⁸

Further, if more minority teachers and administrators are hired it will be harder to use stereotypes; one will not be able to point to one or two minorities and call them "exceptions to the rule." Too, increased minority personnel will help to deter the pervasive acculturation process which teachers, as primary agents of the dominant educational system, continue to perpetuate. In addition, attitudes of the faculty and staff must reflect a positive acceptance of all children regardless of their differences. Differences in language, dialect, sex, and color should be accepted and affirmed *only* as differences and not deficiencies. Teachers should be the spokespersons for the elimination of phrases used daily in our society that

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

further perpetuate racist behavior, such as blackmail; savage Indian; Frito Bandito; and no woman or no minority can be President.

The curriculum used in the schools should be relevant and capable of meeting the needs of each student regardless of race, especially since "a curriculum should represent the system of symbolic meaning by which a child is inducted into his culture."⁹ Students are not androids who can be educated by using the assembly line, mass production method. A curriculum written for Dick and Jane, living in white suburbia, often fails to meet the needs of the children in the ghettos, barrios, and on the reservations. Differences in lifestyles and experiences necessitate non-identical curricula. Any school system that fails to provide a curriculum that meets the needs of all students is only further perpetuating racism.

In order to eliminate the racism (and sexism) in instructional materials it will be necessary to stop the buck-passing that occurs between publishers and schools. The buck-passing scenario goes something like this:

Publisher—"We publish what our clients want, remember this is a business and we have to show a profit."

School system—"We can only purchase materials that publishers have available. Teachers don't want to make their own."

In order to stop the buck-passing and to eliminate the perpetuation of racism, there should be a moratorium placed on the purchase of instructional materials. This moratorium should exist until there has been set up and implemented a procedure for assuring the elimination of racism and sexism in instructional materials.

Why Eliminate Racism?

Earlier, we stated that one is either a perpetrator of racism, a supporter, or a victim, but does that realistically and pragmatically provide a reason that, if one is a

⁹ Seymour W. Itzkoff. *Cultural Pluralism and American Education*. Scranton, Pennsylvania: International Textbook Company, 1969. p. 148.

perpetuator or supporter he or she should stop being a racist? In other words, why should we effect the changes listed previously? An appeal that it is morally evil to dehumanize a fellow human being seems to be a weak argument in today's society. More practical reasons related to economics, societal conditions, and the waste of human potential may be more easily accepted.

The pitting of racial groups against each other dissipates energy through hatred rather than in a constructive way that will benefit society. Environmental and economic problems face all of us regardless of ethnic origin and could better be attacked and sooner resolved if the talents of all people worked toward such common goals.

The United States frequently is embarrassed and ridiculed in its international affairs because it requests other countries to treat their citizens in a manner which we have not achieved in 200 years. "A mind is a terrible thing to waste," but the racist nature of our society and schools causes thousands of minority students to be "pushed out" of school each year. Such students are frequently unable to be of benefit to themselves or society. In fact, they cost society money that could be better spent in cleaning up our environment and making schools a happy place to learn.

In conclusion, the elimination of racism in schools will occur only after or in concert with the elimination of racism in the United States. Elimination of racism in this country will not occur until the laws passed to eliminate it are enforced. Laws not enforced become a mockery of justice and further encourage more racist behavior. The United States' record in enforcing those laws that are of the uppermost good for the country is excellent. Income tax laws have been, by and large, enforced. Therefore, the same determination and commitment is needed by the government to enforce those laws that can bring about an end to racism. The enforcement of corrective legislation alone will not be enough. The schools must now shoulder their share of the burden for eliminating the racism which they have heretofore helped to perpetuate. □

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