

School Desegregation: Moving the Debate Forward

ALEX MOLNAR

I am somewhat heartened by the nature of the disagreement between Kenneth Clark and Derrick Bell. When I was a child, it was still acceptable in the U.S., to question the right of black students to attend school with white students. Today it is not. Today, despite the continued existence of racism in our society, public policy debate assumes that the separation of students because of race is unacceptable. Although there is often an enormous distance from a shift in assumptions to the formulation of effective social policy, the shift ought not be dismissed as unimportant. It's worth noticing that racism can no longer so easily be overt and that racist assumptions are no longer sanctioned as public currency.

In spite of my guarded optimism about changes in racist social attitudes, I confess to a fair amount of concern over the depth and durability of racism in our society. Perhaps school desegregation would continue to be a public policy issue even if the American body politic were not, as Derrick Bell points out, poisoned by racism. But I doubt it. The problem of school desegregation is embedded in and inseparable from the racism that continues to persist in American society. The remedies for one cannot be understood apart from the remedies for the other. School segregation cannot, at its root, be understood as a purely educational problem.

While the United States in 1984 is not the United States of 1954, some still argue that further progress against racism depends on educational efforts to



continue to change racist attitudes. Further changes in attitude will, the logic goes, promote behavior change. This is a hard position to oppose.

Yet when I compare the effectiveness of the government's "Let's all be brothers" human relations campaigns of the 50s with the effectiveness of black activism in the 60s and subsequent legislation designed to prohibit racist behavior,

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I worry lest we lose sight of the need to act. That is, we must individually and as a society find ways to strengthen and extend anti-racist attitudes.

Educators seem particularly vulnerable to the tacit assumption that racism rests primarily on a lack of knowledge, sometimes forgetting the power of repeated patterns of self-reinforcing behaviors. For example, I don't know if white restaurant workers in the South are racist or not; I do know that regardless of their attitude, they must now serve blacks and whites at the same counter, and that change is probably more powerful than all the one-minute human relations blurbs on TV put together. The point here is not very different from the old educational saw, "Children learn what they do."

The issues in 1984 are not the same as those in 1954, in part because the battleground has shifted from attacks on legally sanctioned racism to the construction of a nonracist society. That is a much more elusive goal. How to transform the racist nature of American society and the role schools can and should play in that process are the questions that help define the context of policy debate over school desegregation today. Serious consideration of these questions brings us face to face with the realization that U.S. society is sharply stratified by class. Perhaps we, as educators, should begin to analyze how meaningful the concept of equal educational opportunity is in a society as unequal as ours. Perhaps in the 1980s we can begin to think about the desegregation of

schools by class as well as by race, and our contribution to future public policy discussions can include a refusal to accept political rhetoric about equal opportunity. Perhaps in the future we can find ways to assert that nothing short of *actual* equality in school and society is good enough to satisfy the responsibilities our profession confers on us.

Resources on School Desegregation

In assembling resources for this month's issue, I consulted with Claire Halverson of the University of Wisconsin Extension Division. She suggests the following resources:

Integrated Education. Meyer Weinberg, editor. Published by the Center for Equal Education, School of Education, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA 01003. This magazine is devoted to research and policy concerns in desegregation and integration.

Council on Interracial Books for Children Bulletin, published by the Council on Interracial Books for Children, Inc., 1841 Broadway, New York, NY 10023. This bulletin has practical ideas for classroom use and reviews of children's literature. It is not devoted entirely to integration issues; other topics, such as homosexuality, problems posed by handicaps, and so on, are sometimes treated. The council also publishes a wide variety of teaching materials, both print and nonprint. A catalog is available.

Teaching in a Pluralistic Society: Concepts, Models, and Strategies. Ricardo G. Garcia. New York: Harper and Row, 1982. Discusses the theory of multiethnic education and provides plenty of practical teaching and curriculum suggestions.

Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies. James A. Banks. Newton, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 1983.

National Committee for School Desegregation. Contact Chairperson, Dorothy Jones, (617) 498-9238. Correspondence should be sent to Project Manager, Office of Desegregation, 159 Thorndike St., Cambridge, MA 0241. This committee sponsors a yearly conference on the "how to" of desegregation, research on desegregation, and political action. *Newsline*, published five or six times a year contains information on desegregation in schools throughout the country.

Note: Edward Kealy of The National Committee for School Desegregation recommends: *Effective School Desegregation: Equality, Quality, and Feasibility*. Willis D. Hawley, editor. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1981. □

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