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OPEN ENROLLMENT: AN ASSESSMENT

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The "Open Enrollment" program of the Board of Education of New York City provides an opportunity to examine the major issues inherent in the pursuit of school integration. The "Open Enrollment" program is an endeavor to provide an integrated educational setting for children of Negro and Puerto-Rican parentage, by permitting them to transfer from *de facto* segregated schools to schools in white communities.

The basic question is whether the Board of Education has the right to exercise its prerogative to provide the best and most realistic education for its students. In today's world "best" and "realistic" are interchangeable with "integrated." The assumption that the Board of Education had the right and responsibility to provide the integrated educational setting and experience met with hostile reaction in some quarters. This position was confused in the minds of many with the Supreme Court's decision in the *Brown* case in May 1954. The Court finding that "... to separate (Negro children) from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone . . ." was taken by many to imply that race could not be a factor in the moving of children even for integration. Since "de facto" rather than "de jure" segregation existed in northern communities, some held that the Board of Education was powerless to effect integration without violating the Supreme Court decision.

Judge Irving Kaufman alluded to just such a situation in reaction to the New Rochelle Board of Education's concern over providing services specifically to a given minority group. Judge Kaufman stated in part "... the Constitution is not this color blind . . . there are instances where it is not only justified, but necessary, to provide for such allegedly "unequal treatment" in order to achieve the equality guaranteed by the Constitution." This was clear recognition of the need to provide unequal treatment (in New York City's case recognition of "race") in order to achieve ultimate equality.

The role of education is recognized as crucial in the development of an informed public and viable democracy. Through our country's history various educational trends have evolved in attempts to maintain this viability, *e.g.* the drive to eliminate illiteracy, which induced the compulsory educational law; the development of the vocational

schools, resulting from industrialization; and the emphasis on Americanism and assimilation, flowing from the previously dominant "melting pot" approach to the non-Northern European immigrant. The educator's main responsibility involved creation of the administrative procedure, curriculum, and climate to properly prepare the student for the demands made upon him by recurring societal change. Where social innovations fostered new demands, educational approaches were adjusted to meet the challenge. Today, social change in our country and throughout the world has initiated an entire new order of demands upon the educational ingenuity of America. The attempt to forge positive relationships with the emerging non-white countries of the world, the programs designed to uncover scientific talent and our anxiety concerning the development of the "specially gifted" student, manifest our determination to meet this challenge.

The Supreme Court decision on school desegregation constitutes another force for social change. The *Brown* decision contributed to our realization that no group can be set apart from the remainder in educational institutions, without damaging all those involved in the educational process. To the Negro this damage openly manifests itself through inferior facilities, teachers, curriculum, achievement levels and per capita expenditure. Psychologically, both the Negro and white students are affected. Self-evaluations on the part of the white student are unrealistic and result from the superior position held in the social structure because his skin is white. The Negro is a product of a value system which regulates certain phenotypic manifestations, over which he has no control, to the lowest level of the system.

Again, in curriculum, the Negro and the white student are adversely affected. This occurs in the segregated white and Negro educational institutions as well as the "integrated" schools. The white person's view and expectation of the Negro, as indeed the Negro's view of himself, is affected by the treatment of the Negro in curriculum. There is evidence of but a scattered mention of the Negro's real role in the development of our society. The dignity of his African heritage—language, customs, folkways, traditions—is destroyed through an historical approach which roots the Negro's development to slavery, rather than viewing the condition as a transitional phase from one culture to another. Our elementary school readers still do not include illustrations of Negroes. Today, such approaches to learning can no longer be tolerated. Students must be prepared to function in a pluralistic society. In order to achieve this, the best and most realistic education is one which is integrated.

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Properly instituted *integrated education is the organic uniting of administration, teachers, curriculum, and students of diverse cultures and colors into an educational whole*. It transcends the mechanical moving of students. It is a commitment to a new educational concept. If the Boards of Education in northern communities recognized this concept, the issue of "race" as such would not be *the* factor in the moving of children. The Board of Education would be recognizing its responsibility to provide the best education for its students, and to spell out the ingredients of such an education. The greatest mistake that could be made is the assumption that it is "business as usual" in the desegregated school. The failure to articulate the integrated educational experience is crucial in securing Negro and white community support for such an experience.

Basic to the integrated educational experience is the acceptance of "cultural pluralism," which replaces the old "melting pot" approach to people of diverse cultural heritage. Cultural pluralism is a recognition that the threads of intrinsic unity, long sought in our ethnocentric approach to people of different cultures and colors, exist in the essence of man and is not a function of cultural monoism. Under cultural pluralism the problem is no longer one of "assimilation" on the part of the "out" group, but rather preserving those elements of the "foreign" culture which contribute to the development of a society. Education within the integrated setting assumes a character quite different from its role when the "melting pot" psychology was prevalent. Instead of the suppression of the customs, traditions, folkways . . . yes, and even the language of a people, education moves to identify these elements of culture, creating an atmosphere for understanding, appreciation and acceptance of them. Cultural pluralism permits the essentials of culture to manifest their dignity as a contribution to the integrated educational experience.

Society is continually changing in scope and intensity, making it extremely difficult to develop citizens capable of effectively functioning with others of diverse cultures and colors without adequate preparation. Since all the skills needed to exist are acquired after birth, we must alter the view that education is measured by achievement levels and scholarship alone. We should recognize that the ability to accept the equal essence of man, cultural differences, and self images unbiased by prejudice and misconceptions of self worth, are all intrinsic to good education. Man must learn to live with others in dignity before his capabilities can be fully manifested. Education can, and *must* provide the tools, techniques and avenues through which such existence can be assured.

THE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

"Open Enrollment," then, as a process, is just one aspect of school integration. It provides the educational setting conducive to the integrated educational experience. It is folly to assume that the mere proximity of students to each other is the only requirement necessary to undo generations of inadequate education. Now, as in the past, physical integration without a sound commitment will not provide the education necessary for this generation of children. Only when there is consensus on the educational ingredients inherent in the process will we properly prepare our children for the demands which will be made upon them in their time.

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