Basic issues in Black Education

By Manning Marble

One of the decisive battleground between Black people and the American government has been in the field of education.

At the beginning of the modern Civil Rights Movement, activists in Little Rock, Arkansas and other Southern towns challenged the legitimacy of segregation and white supremacy by attacking the existence of Jim Crow public schools. For many Blacks, desegregated education became the vehicle through which some of their broader political demands against racism could be achieved. By the late 1966s, however, the dimensions of the Black critique of American education had shifted significantly. Astute observers within the Black movement began to recognize the limitations of the demand for desegregation within public schools, and the very bankrupt and backward condition of the entire educational establishment which whites had created for themselves.

In Education and Black Struggle, editied by the Institute of the Black World, Grace Boggs observed that "the individualist, opportunist orientation of American education has been ruinous to the American community and most obviously, of course, to the Black community." Children are "isloated" from one another; the "natural leadership between theory and practice" is reversed "in order to keep kids off the labor market. The natural way to learn is to be interested first and then to develop the skill to pursue your interest." Dissatisfaction with the educational status quo, combined with a desire to advance the submerged traditions of Black ethnicity, culture and history within a structural form, led to a revolution in Black thinking and practice in the arena of education.

By the mid-1970s, the grounds for educational struggle had shifted still further away from the clear-cut demands for "integration within white educational institutions." Generally, the major issues involving education which confronted Blacks during the period were the following:

1) Desegregation. Broad elements of the political New Right had taken the question of "School busing for racial balance" and turned it into a platform for white supremacy. Should Blacks continue to support in principle the desegregation of public educational institutions, especially through the use of "busing?" Were all-Black public schools, as the N.A.A.C.P maintained, "inferior?"

2) Traditional Black colleges and universities. The desegregation of American civil society and the limited reforms granted by the Johnson Adminstration had accelerated Black enrollments at traditionally white universities and colleges. What should happen to traditional Black colleges? Should they be merged with "white-sister institutions," or gradually "integrated" by white students, faculty and administrators?

3) Black Studies. After the boom period of the late 1960s, Black Studies Departments experienced drastic cutbacks and attacks from white universities. What was the philosophical basis for Black Studies in the era of expanding desegregation? What was the relationship, if any, between the general white reaction in culture and politics during the 1970s and the decline of Black Studies during the period?

4) The issue of community controlled public schools and other educational institutions within Black neighborhoods. The principle of community control of schools must be explored as an important process for educational improvement and accountability. Major cities like New York, which has had community school districts for the past decade, have never really had community control per se. Local school boards have few official powers, and the state legislature carefully circumscribed the authority of local school administrators. Real community control, where the final educational authority actually resides within the Black community, would mean the beginning of a healthier, more productive and challenging atmosphere in our public schools.

Community-controlled schools, progressive Black administrators, plus massive, new federal expenditures in the form of outright grants and low interest loans to such schools, could produce an educational experience for Black children superior in most respects to a suburban, white school. The choice of setting linguistic and ethnic curriculum standards would remain in our own hands, as would our children's futures. Will a move toward this kind of educational alternative occur in the 1980s?

The answers to all of these questions must begin from a single observation: the problems and issues relative to Black education must emerge out of the more basic demands for Black political struggle during the coming years. Certainly, inspite of their limitations, the Civil Rights activists in Little Rock almost three decades ago were asking the right kinds of questions. They viewed the issue of education for their children within the general context of a segregated racist society.

The demand for integrated education, during the 1950s, constituted a political demand against both Jim Crow and the American government which could not be resolved unless basic changes were initiated in the system. The eventual demise of Jim Crow education in the South mean, in effect, a blow against segregation as a whole. Politics was the key determining factor in Black educational strategies.

In examing the issues of busing, the future role of the traditional Black universities, the necessity for Black Studies curricula, and the prospects for community-controlled schools, politics, not education in a narrow sense, must be in charge of our inquiry. Our long range objective, to create a more democratic and egalitarian society in both economic relations and in human relations, must determine the critical policies and processes of Black education.

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