

**DIALOGUE**

**EDUCATION REFORM: THE ANSWER IS A CHANGE IN PHILOSOPHY**

**Part V**

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Beyond the theoretical debate over the merits of the prevailing child-centered philosophy in our schools today, and the traditional American approach to schooling, it seems to me there are some special reasons why we should push for the latter form of education in schools with large numbers of poor and minority children.

First, we cannot fail to remember that poor children and especially black children from poverty stricken environments have been and still are the most vulnerable population in ineffective schools.

The harsh indictment on the status of minority students in our schools, that the National Coalition of Advocates for Students reported in 1985, unfortunately has not been vacated: "Minority children do not matter as much as non-minority children do to some school officials, judging by the disproportionate number of such children who are excluded and underserved by the schools.

We know, for example, that Black students are placed in classes for the mildly mentally handicapped at rates more than three times those of white children. Poor children, too, are considered less important than non-poor children, if we contrast the level of financing allocated for their education with that allocated for children in more affluent districts." Poor and minority children are clearly in need of meaningful education due to the peculiar barriers they face because they are not white and affluent.

Second, the traditional American form of education is highly organized and presupposes a structured environment by the categorizations and fuzzy stages of cognitive development in the child centered curriculum that seem to inhibit learning as much as promote it, particularly among poor and unsupported students. For children from deprived environments, whose lives are often without discipline and guidance, nothing could be more important for stimulating their intellectual development and self awareness than this kind of structured learning setting.

A third feature that commends the traditional American form of education for children from a deprived environment is the self-assurance they acquired as a result of developing sound literacy skills and real knowledge

from the study of demanding academic subjects. As a child of the Great Depression from a small rural school in Southwest Louisiana, where all of the children in my school were below the "poverty line," had one been drawn, neither poverty nor segregation reduced our ability to learn how to read or to do basic mathematics on par with any other child in America.

Unencumbered by "scientific" principles of whole language and new math theories, a poor child

like all other children was assumed to be able and expected to learn to spell and read through a mastery of phonics, about which there was no mystery. Access to think logically and reason analytically was also believed to be available through the mastery of mathematical computation and problem solving in algebra, trigonometry and geometry.

Another strong argument in favor of the traditional American curriculum is the high

expectation it holds for the performance of all students. If there is one thing that we have learned for certain during the past decade of reform, it is that high expectations are far more effective in positively influencing student attitudes and improving achievement than so-called child-centered interventions.

This truism is also reflected among the principles underlining the New York City new Curriculum Frameworks: Grades Pre-K - 12, which declares that

"All students including those with special needs should be challenged to fulfill their utmost potential. ... Only when students are measured by high standards will they aspire to meet and even exceed those standards."

Finally, finding a solution to the underperformance of American children in our schools, and particularly our poor and minority children, will not come easily, as frustration and uncertainty mount over when a sustained turnaround will begin.

The purpose of this discussion is to suggest that ultimately the quality of any education is what happens in the classroom and that meaningful reform is curriculum-centered. Maybe the answer to our school problem is more fundamental and can be addressed only in a reconsideration of the philosophy of education that prevails in our schools. Surely we have an obligation to seriously consider this possibility.

**ENGINEERING**

*(Continued from Page 4)*

constructing bridges, tunnels, large buildings, dams, etc. Chemical engineers deal with production of materials that require a chemical change during their manufacture, materials such as paints, lubricants, medicines/drugs, or cosmetics.

Mechanical engineers deal with designing and manufacturing machinery and tools. Industrial engineers deal more with employers of

corporations, helping them to find ways to increase worker productivity, reduce and control the quality of the company's products.

The effects of engineering are ever present in the world today, yet according to 1994 statistics from the U.S. Bureau of Labor, of the 1,716 employed civilian engineers, only 3.7 percent of them were Black. Statistics found that most of these were employed as civil

engineers, of 221 employed civilian civil engineers, 4.7 percent were Black. This 4.7 percent figure represents the highest percentage of civilian employed Blacks in any branch of engineering.

The percentage of Hispanics and women was also very small. Of the 1,716 mentioned above, only 3.6 percent were Hispanic. So, it is clear that not enough Blacks, minorities or females are playing major roles in the structuring of the world they live in.

Hebeeba X Brown, an electrical engineer in Atlanta, Ga., says that one way to encourage more interest in engineering (from Black youth in particular), is for parents to become more involved, from earliest learning stages, in courses of study their children are taking. Guide them to take more challenging courses in mathematics and science, and to steer them towards college prep courses in high school, he advised.

Dr. Howard agrees that early exposure is key. Youth need to see that there are "viable career options" for them to pursue in this profession. Science fairs, summer programs, and mentoring programs are ways to give youth an introduction to engineering skills.

Ms. Brown states that one

obstacle minorities in engineering or other technical professions face is the stereotype that they are not as intelligent as whites. Therefore, the thinking of some is that minorities (particularly Blacks) in these professions only got their training and employment as a result of affirmative action, not as a result of hard work and intelligence of mind.

But though the number of Blacks in technical fields is small, there have been great contributions and achievements made by them. Archie Alexander (1887-1958), was a Black civil engineer who founded his own company and was responsible for building the Tidal Basin Bridge in Washington, D.C., and building the heating plant at the University of Iowa.

Dr. Mae Jemison received a degree in Chemical Engineering from Stanford University and was the first Black woman in space.

George Carruthers received a Ph.D. in physics from the University of Illinois. He is 1 of 2 naval researchers responsible for the Apollo 16 lunar surface ultraviolet cameras, which were placed on the moon in 1972.

Shirley Ann Jackson is a physicist who received her B.S. degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1968. In 1973, she became the first Black woman to receive a Ph.D. in physics.

These are just a few of many examples of Blacks who have made and continue to make great accomplishments in technical fields and engineering.

It is clear to see why, "There is no nation that can get up unless it has knowledge of Engineering." It appears that no nation can be built, structured, maintained or improved without it.

For those who will run the world, the desire to play major roles in the structuring of their world in the coming century, increasing mastery of math, science and engineering is a MUST.

**COMPETING**

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AFRICAN AMERICANS CANNOT SIT BACK AND LET THIS COUNTRY BECOME a second rate nation. Unless you have some place else to go, your economic survival is linked to this country. Since a disproportionate number of our students and our workers are being affected during this economic downturn, it is in our best interest to understand the vital role that education plays in creating a skilled work force that will produce exceptional products to sell to the global marketplace. Let's start by setting high standards for our own children, grandchildren, and most of all, ourselves.

**ON THE ABSTINENCE FRONT**

**Chastity on the Mall**

**PART II**

During the last couple of years especially, as teenage pregnancies and illnesses from disease escalate, there is a growing determination by concerned adults to help redirect America's youth away from promiscuous lifestyles. The Spring 1994 edition of Issues & Views listed several abstinence advocacy groups that have been formed with this goal in mind.

This year, in July, thousands of teenagers from around the country descended on Washington, D.C.'s Mall, to proclaim sex until marriage, or to dedicate themselves to a "second virginity." The True Love Waits Rally was sponsored by the Baptist Sunday School Board, as part of an international campaign to reach young people with the abstinence message.

At the rally, each teenager signed a brief, straightforward pledge card that stated, "Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, those I date, my future mate and my future children to be sexually pure until the day I enter marriage." As of July, 211,163 teenagers had signed pledge cards. Planted in rows on the Mall, these thousands of cards were a dramatic demonstration of youthful rebellion against the popular dictates of a permissive culture.

**Abstinence Education**

In the student handbook of the abstinence curriculum Reasonable Reasons to Wait, teenagers are urged to ponder how being "free" to do as you please might actually diminish one's freedom. "Where is the freedom for the girl (or boy) in waiting anxiously each month to verify that the girl is not pregnant? Where is the freedom in worrying about sexually transmitted disease?"

A survey by the National Association for Abstinence Education found that students who completed the curriculum Teen Aid were more likely to affirm that abstinence was the best way to avoid pregnancy and disease, and that pre-marital sex was now against their values and standards.

Another curriculum, Sex Respect, not only provides manuals for teacher and students but offers a special guidebook for parents as well. Parents are invited to follow the course and provide moral support to their youngsters. The guidebook also offers suggestions on how to bring parents together in meetings. The author of Sex Respect, Coleen Kelly Mast, says, "statistics indicate teens refrain from sex for two reasons - fear of pregnancy and fear of disappointing their parents. Parents who offer their kids contraceptives have destroyed both reasons."

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