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Candid Comments

School Integration

"Integration" is a term that was first applied to the European immigrants, including the Jews. Assimilation meant the melting pot, homogenization. Integration, on the other hand, meant "becoming one" with the rest of the nation in economic and political life—and a common acceptance of basic social values without losing one's cultural and group identity.

Thus, for most of the immigrant populations, the integrating power of the schools did not have to do with physical mixing, as many of us from the East will remember. It had to do with learning a common language, common democratic values, the common skills of the nation. This was the important integration function of the schools.

However "integration" took on a somewhat different meaning for Black children in the South. Southern states had physically segregated the schools by laws, in effect saying to Black children: you have to go to separate schools, because you're inferior and we don't want white children to be tainted by you. That was contrary to our official national values; and a specific educational burden to Black children with its negative self-image. Both of these points were picked up by the Supreme Court in its landmark 1954 decision which ordered the "integration" of officially segregated public schools. Over 5,000 Southern school districts have formally desegregated. This left the question of *de facto* segregation—in the North as well as in the South. In San Francisco, in 1966 Black students comprised less than five percent of the student body in 22 of San Francisco's elementary schools; and more than 85 percent of the student body in 14 of San Francisco's elementary schools. The courts began to take the view that the 1954 Supreme Court decision applied to these schools as well. They leaned heavily on the sociological findings cited by the Supreme Court that racially concentrated schools were detrimental to the educational achievement of Black students.



Raab

But Professor James Coleman recently summarized the mountain of research on the subject: "The academic achievement of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds (black or white) was benefited by being in school with children from higher socio-economic backgrounds (black or white). This benefit is not nearly sufficient to overcome the educational disadvantage of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The (research) results have been used inappropriately by the courts to support the premise that equal protection for Black children is not provided unless racial balance is achieved in the schools."

In other words, the schools will have to pursue different means than racial balance, if they want to effectively equalize educational opportunity. Physical integration serves other important purposes for our society: bettering intergroup relations, strengthening basic national values. These values require a continued drive for more racial balance in the schools—but there is no evidence that they require a precise mathematical formula.

Perhaps we can allow mathematical prescriptions for racial balance to be a bit more flexible while we concentrate on the educational achievement of our children. This means, for example, special "magnet" courses and "magnet" schools for students based primarily on their special interests, the imaginative stimulation of these interests among all students, and special ethnic cultural pursuits. These are needs for the more as well as the less advantaged students. Indeed if a good socio-economic mix is helpful in raising everyone's level of academic achievement, it is possible only if middle class parents and children stay in the public school system. This calls for attention to their educational and psychological needs as well.

None of this can mean declaring open season on the principle of integration. "Anti-busing" laws, for example, are an abrasive affront to the Black community, and should be to all of us. They smell of the same racial rejection as laws requiring separate schools. By the same token, we can't tolerate a return in San Francisco to the racial concentrations of 1966.

In short, the most profound purposes of integration would best be accomplished at this time by establishing the educational achievement of all students as *the* priority goal for the school system. This goal is not primarily served by enslavement to some rigid racial population formula. However, it must be done without turning the clock back on the progress we have made towards better racial balance, which serves its own important social purpose. That's the tough job our new school board faces.