Urban Education in the 1970's

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Having, in the past decade, spent billions of dollars on compensatory education, initiated thousands of projects, completed hundreds of studies, entered numerous judicial decisions and rulings, experienced dozens of riots and disorders, and generated whole new agencies and educational institutions, the nation's urban schools continue to operate in a vortex of segregation, alienation, and declining achievement. Various strategies and programs have been proposed for achieving equality of educational opportunity. The crisis in urban education has stimulated total rethinking about the educative process—the goals, the means, the resources, the strategies, the relationships—for all individuals, the advantaged and the disadvantaged, the majority and the minority. No panaceas exist but comprehensive planning based on the reservoir of experience, research, and theory can provide for effective learning in which the entire community becomes the site for education of urban populations.

Dans la décennie passée, ayant dépensé des milliards de dollars pour l'éducation compensatoire, inauguré des milliers de projets, terminé des centaines d'études, participé à de nombreuses décisions juridiques, subi des douzaines d'émeutes et de désordres, et engendré des établissements entièrement nouveaux et des institutions pédagogiques, les écoles urbaines du pays continuent à fonctionner dans un tourbillon de ségrégation, d'alémentation, et de déclin dans les résultats. Des stratégies et des programmes variés ont été proposés pour atteindre l'égalité dans l'éducation. La crise de l'éducation urbaine nécessite qu'on repense totalement nos idées du processus éducatif—les buts, les moyens, les ressources, les stratégies, les relations—pour tous les individus, avantagés et désavantagés, la majorité et la minorité. Il n'existe pas de panacées mais une planification intelligente, basée sur l'expérience, la recherche, et la théorie, pourra mener à une meilleure compréhension dans laquelle la communauté entière devient le site pour l'éducation de populations urbaines.

What is ahead for urban education in the 1970's? What will be the future of the ghetto and the slum in American cities and how will it affect and be affected by education? In what ways will education for urban populations—particularly the increasing portion designated as the “disadvantaged”—be reshaped, and will changes result in substantial opening of opportunities for individuals from these groups? These are hard questions about which to speculate, especially in the light of events of the past decade.

In the early 1960's, as the civil rights movement and the war on poverty gathered momentum and as the post-Sputnik concern for skilled manpower highlighted the inadequate development of talent among minority groups, Congress was on the threshold of new social legislation and one could be optimistic, despite the apparent complexities of the problems. A summer 1962 conference concerned with education in depressed areas concluded on this note: “The outlook is hopeful in the forces which are being mobilized to dissect and resolve this wasteful, destructive problem of displaced citizens in a rejecting and ignoring homeland” (Passow, 1963, p.351).

Since then, having spent billions of dollars on compensatory education, initiated thousands of projects (each with its own clever acronym title), completed hundreds of studies of uneven significance and even more disparate quality, entered numerous judicial decisions and rulings, experienced dozens of riots and disorders, and generated whole new agencies and educational institutions, the nation's urban schools continue to operate in a vortex of segregation, alienation, and declining achievement.

Despite a considerable amount of rhetoric and numerous studies and reports, what has been called the "urban crisis" grows more intense in all its dimensions. The Kerner Commission, probing for the causes of civil disorders, pointed to the interactions of a variety of factors—economic, political, health, welfare, education, justice, security—and warned: "None of us can escape the consequences of the continuing economic and social decay of the central city and the closely related problem of rural poverty" (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968, p.410). The Commission saw a continued movement toward two societies—one essentially white in the suburbs, small cities, and outlying districts, and the other largely nonwhite, located in the central cities—and declared that "we are well on the way to just such a divided nation."

While the concentration of the poor and the non-white populations continues in central cities, Downs
(1968) asserts that "not one single significant program of any federal, state, or local government is aimed at altering this tendency or is likely to have the unintended effect of doing so" (p.1333). Preliminary data from the 1970 national census indicates that the greatest population growth has been in suburbia with the segregation of the poor and minority groups becoming even more intense in central cities. Black and other non-white migration to suburbia does appear to be increasing at a rate that seems to be exceeding earlier projections. An analysis by Birch (1970) noted that the consequences of these population shifts "on the inner suburbs and, eventually, on the outer suburbs, may be quite dramatic. Already inner suburb densities are approaching those of central cities, and increasing density growth is attributable to the poor and the Blacks" (p.36).

The American city faces a fourfold dilemma: fewer tax dollars available as middle-income taxpayers move out and property values, business, and commerce decline; more tax dollars needed for essential public services and facilities and for meeting the basic needs of low-income groups; increasing costs of goods and services resulting in dwindling tax dollars buying less; and increasing dissatisfaction with services provided as needs, expectations, and living standards increase (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968, p.399). While it is possible to cite improvements in many aspects of urban life and development, the imperative needs call for far greater investments of our intellectual and financial resources. In the current crisis, education is part of the problem as well as part of the solution. Aside from the role of schools in developing "brainpower" and all that is entailed in those endeavors, education represents the means for creating the commitments and attitudes needed to grapple with the problems as well as the promise of our urban centers.

**Urban Education in Trouble**

Surveys of large-city school systems continue to document the failures of the inner-city schools, confirming that they are, as the situation in Washington, D.C. was characterized, "in deep and probably worsening trouble." The District of Columbia schools report, noting that the same findings would undoubtedly obtain in most large-city systems, observed:

"Applying the usual criteria of scholastic achievement as measured by holding power of the school, by college-going and further education, by post secondary school employment status, by performance on Armed Forces induction tests, the District schools do not measure up well. Like most school systems, the District has no measures on the extent to which schools are helping students attain other educational objectives, for there are no data on self-concepts, ego-development, values, attitudes, aspirations, citizenship and other 'non-academic' but important aspects of personal growth. However, the inability of large numbers of children to reverse the spiral of futility and break out of the poverty-stricken ghettos suggests that the schools are no more successful in attaining these goals than they are in the more traditional objectives." (Passow, 1967b, p.2)

The HEW Urban Education Task Force (1970) cited as indicators of the challenge facing urban schools such facts as student unrest on secondary school and college campuses, groups seeking community control of neighborhood schools, teacher strikes, voter rejection of bond issues, court suits, lack of priority for education evidenced by state and local governments, and a sharp increase in alternative plans for schooling. Most important, however, is the conviction of large numbers of minority ethnic and racial groups that "they have been short-changed by their fellow American citizens—the white majority—who largely control the social, economic, political and educational institutions of our nation" (p.5).

After presenting "evidence which indicates the enormity of the failure of the urban public schools to educate the poor in the past and the present," Pressman (1966) argued that those concerned with educating the urban poor "cannot realistically rely on the public schools to do more than a disappointingly small fraction of the job at hand" (p.62). And gloomy observers, such as Kozol (1970), warned: "An ominous cloud hangs over the major cities of America: It is the danger that our ghetto schools, having long ceased to educate children entrusted to their care, will shortly cease to function altogether" (p.28).

The Kerner Commission pointed to the failure of the ghetto schools to provide the kind and quality of education that would help overcome the effects of discrimination and deprivation as one of the festering sources of resentment and grievance in Black communities, contributing to increasing conflict and disruption. Moreover, the "bleak record of public education for