

Introduction: race in American education

Since its earliest beginnings, the American public school system has been deeply committed to the maintenance of racial and ethnic barriers. Higher education, both public and private, shared this outlook. Philosophers of the common schools remained silent about the education of minority children. The most devout defenders of the common school from Horace Mann to John Dewey held their tongues when the subject of minority – especially black – children became a public issue. Exceptions were few, and the comfort they afforded minority children slight.

Public school authorities also all but deserted minority children. Federal, state, and local governments communicated the political imperatives of racial exclusion to the school. These became the guidelines for discriminatory school policies. Professional organizations of teachers and administrators collaborated actively in maintaining the racial order. The alum of privilege sealed many a lip. White educators profited from the enforced absence of black and other minority competitors for jobs. Planned deprivation became a norm of educational practice.

Deliberate racial and ethnic discrimination in schools followed a national, not a sectional, pattern. Nor did the discriminatory patterns flow northward. If anything, the direction of flow was southward. Before the Civil War, every important technique of discrimination was practiced in the North. These ranged from statutory exclusion of black children from the public schools to legally required separate schools to discriminatory school finance. After the Civil War, these practices – and more – made their appearance throughout the South. The development of a national educational profession facilitated the nationwide transfer of discriminatory techniques.

But nearly all this has escaped notice in the standard histories of the United States and of American education. Unfortunately, scholarly research sometimes bears the same relationship to truth as staring does to sight. All the mental equipment is at hand, but nothing much registers. The eyes may as well be closed.

Historians have fashioned a benevolent portrayal of constantly expanding opportunity. The creation of the common school system of public

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education around mid-nineteenth century is equated with a national conviction that educational opportunity must be made universal. But such an ideal never existed in historical America. Racial and ethnic barriers were accepted by school people as inevitable limitations on educational opportunity. The tendency of historians to adopt the same view reflects an intellectual problem of far deeper import than simple individual prejudice.

A fundamental characteristic of modern life is not the existence of social problems but the effort to seek the aid of scientific thought in solving them. Basic to scientific inquiry is a habit of seeking the factual core of a subject. Indeed, modern industrial culture disciplines us to what Veblen long ago called the matter-of-fact mode of thought.¹ We tend to take things as they are, without such aids as superstition and the supernatural. Nature and society tend to be seen as matters of fact rather than as parts of a sacred order.

The authority of this mode of thought, as well as of science and scholarly research, rests on a foundation assumption that matters of fact are rooted in reality. Science is valued as a way of uncovering what is real. When, however, science becomes engaged with certain social problems, it may fail even to approach reality. Little defense is then left of its claim to intellectual authority.

American social science long ago adopted a live-and-let-live stance toward racial discrimination. Much effort was expended on explaining how deeply rooted in ancient traditions the folkways of segregation were. Interracial problems were defined in terms of white resistance to change. Negroes were regarded – when they were noticed at all – as passive victims of an inevitable process. Sociology and social psychology, the social sciences most directly relevant to the study of race conflict, virtually abdicated their responsibility. Pettigrew and Back note that “the major private foundations and governmental research agencies have been extremely reluctant to support social research on the desegregation process.”² In time, “the expectation of funding rejection became self-fulfilling.”³ Even when sociological and psychological inquiry did occur, it tended toward investigation of “safer” aspects, such as the role of extremist thought or the impact of racist concepts on individual whites and blacks. Social science as a whole, however, simply failed “to explore the structural and power bases underlying segregation and racial discrimination.”⁴

As a consequence of this failure to engage the mainsprings of racial discrimination, social and behavioral scientists condemned themselves to a superficiality frequently accompanied by astonishment at the course of events in the real world.⁵ Reality threatened to become irrelevant.

But such a fate is not peculiar to the study of race. Blumer remarks that “‘reality’ for empirical science exists only in the empirical world, can be

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sought only there and can be verified only there.”⁶ He declares that “the prevailing mode in the social and psychological sciences is to turn away from direct examination of the empirical social world.”⁷ As a consequence, Blumer continues, “we have multitudes of studies of groups such as delinquents, police, military elites, restless students, racial minorities, and labor unions in which the scholar is unfamiliar with the life of the groups and makes little, if any, effort to get inside their worlds of meaning.”⁸ Only an occasional study holds out for more than a decent acquaintance with the everyday world of social reality.

In matters of race, America’s ugliest reality, the tendency is widespread. We may even speak of a sweeping *suspension* of reality. Discussion and analysis often proceed as though many essential realities do not exist. *Denial* of reality is not adequate to describe the situation; there is no attempt to acknowledge a condition while denying its importance or to argue that a condition does not actually exist in the first place. To suspend reality is to render it invisible. The suspension of reality casts a pallor of unreality over many aspects of the racial situation in the United States. And it has utterly no special regional significance.

Historians also bear an important responsibility for the submergence of reality in the study of race. Not only have they failed to present a balanced factual account of minorities in American education, but they have portrayed minorities as suppliants and passive recipients instead of as parents and persons struggling and contriving autonomously to gain an equal chance for children. A contempt for minorities is expressed even in the most authoritative histories of education.⁹ The failure of nineteenth century colleges to enroll minority youth is attributed even by recent authorities to the young peoples’ insufficient secondary school training; no mention whatever is made of active discrimination by institutions of higher learning.¹⁰ Many historians provide interpretations that effectively cloak the deliberate, conscious policy of racial discrimination of school authorities. This is done even when numerous expressions of discriminatory intent can be found in contemporary documents. Because historians tend to depend upon official records of school boards, they unwittingly reflect a bureaucratic approach to minority children. Frequently absent from these records are straightforward accounts of problems bearing especially on minority children. Secondary sources based on such records tend to reflect this bias. The critical use of school records by historians is in its infancy.

Historians have ignored the role of the parent. To be sure, even Anglo white parents are absent from the historical accounts, but this omission only slightly distorts the picture. These parents, because of their identification with ruling community groups, often succeeded in dominating school board policies. Minority parents, however, denied equal political

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rights in the larger community, were all but excluded from recourse to official government machinery. Responsibility for educating minority children was thrust back upon the minority community itself. With the slenderest financial resources, parents attempted to fashion private schooling comparable to the quality of public schooling. The practical impossibility of such an enterprise pressed minority parents into the political and legal arena to gain access to the public schools. Until recently, such actions were invisible as far as the standard histories of education were concerned. Detailed investigations of the subject are only about a decade old.

White academia ensured its ignorance by excluding eminent minority scholars from university faculties. Their work was discounted as special pleading and unworthy of notice. W. E. B. Du Bois, a graduate of Harvard University, whose doctoral dissertation on the slave trade became the first volume of the Harvard Historical Series, was one of the most prolific students of Negro education, in both its historical and contemporary aspects. Throughout a life of ninety-five years, he was never invited by his alma mater to deliver even a single lecture on this subject or any other.

In 1915, Carter G. Woodson, another black recipient of a Harvard doctorate in history, wrote the first connected history of black education, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*. It was a pioneer work in the truest sense. Woodson saw farther than any author up to that time, and his book arose from his personal dedication and insight rather than from an accepted research tradition. No later historian has even tried to cover the same ground. Woodson was the first historian of education to use primary sources deriving from Negro people, especially correspondence and periodicals. But he was forced into the ghetto of black colleges and finally into a lonely life of immense productivity as an individual scholar. (In Washington, D.C., he was not permitted to join the Harvard Club when it was discovered he was black.)

In 1934, Horace Mann Bond – to whom the present book is dedicated – also wrote a pioneer work, *The Education of the Negro in the American Social Order*. He took up the story where Woodson had stopped, covering the years since the Civil War. Bond was a master not only of historical method but also of the theory and practice of education. As the title of his book indicates, he saw the education of the Negro within a broad social context. Accordingly, Bond attended to the role of political realities, class conflicts, and the economics of planned deprivation. Both he and his work were ignored by universities, which excluded him from employment. White scholars failed to incorporate his contributions into their own work.¹¹ Bond was compelled to teach an extremely heavy load in impecunious Negro colleges.

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The submergence of Du Bois, Woodson, and Bond facilitated the suspension of reality in research on black educational history. Other minorities fared even worse. A generation ago Martha E. Layman wrote the first and only full-scale history of Indian education.¹² For whatever reason, this excellent work was never published, although it continues to be consulted by researchers. No general history of the education of Mexican-American and Puerto Rican children on the mainland has ever been written, nor are the topics mentioned in histories of American education.

This book is concerned almost wholly with four minority groups: blacks, Mexican-Americans, Indian-Americans, and Puerto Ricans. Together, their children make up about one-fifth of all public school students in the United States. In many local areas they constitute an overwhelming majority of enrollment.

The educational history of the children of the four minorities is marked by certain basic commonalities. First, their communities and families occupied a subordinate position in the American economy and society. Incorporated into the nation by force and violence, through enslavement and war, they bore the mark of conquered people. Second, by the consequent exclusion from a voice in government, public institutions were closed to them or made available only on a token basis. Schools fitted into this category. Third, because of their relative powerlessness, they were compelled to help pay for the very services they were forbidden to enjoy. In effect, their taxes often bore the character of tribute rather than of a proportionate share of an equal public burden. Fourth, the educational institutions – both common schools and colleges – adopted the prevailing social evaluation of the conquered peoples. Children were received grudgingly, when at all, and school personnel universally withheld from them the fullest resources available to the children of privileged groups. Fifth, they shared the fate of living in a country that was especially driven to deny the cultural distinctiveness of minority people. This drive to assimilate took on a special force when joined with other commonalities.

But each group also was distinctive. Enslavement was unique to black people and Indians, although varieties of oppression and exploitation were the lot of other minorities. The heritage of slavery was no mere memory of evil things. It was an active effort to salvage the privileges of the old order in a new context. The attempt succeeded for many years, in the classroom and in the wider polity. The designed annihilation of Indian culture was rare in its comprehensiveness and depth. It placed special limitations on the sparse formal education made available sporadically to Indian children. Until recently, a certain tentativeness characterized the Mexican-American's place in American society, in part because of the nearness of the mother country. This feature, too, facilitated the treat-

ment of Chicano children as underprivileged tourists rather than as integral members of the larger society. The physical and cultural separateness and utter economic dependency of Puerto Rico created a setting for sharp deviations from American educational standards.

Children of Asian background shared many of the humiliations of minority status, and their parents suffered extreme material deprivation. Their schools were segregated by law, and during World War II many, even though they were citizens, were placed within concentration-camp-like reservations.¹³

Children of European immigrants experienced the difficulties of cultural strangeness and poverty. But these were remedied in rather short order. Even when explicit discrimination was enacted into law – which happened only rarely – it was quickly overcome. This was, for example, the case with German-speaking Catholics in Wisconsin, who were forbidden by the Bennett Act to conduct school instruction in the German language. The law was overturned in the course of a well-organized political campaign.¹⁴ Neither the German nor any other European group saw its children consigned to deliberately inferior and segregated schools. Nor were they denied the political means to protect their group interests. If their traditions failed to escape ridicule, it occurred to nobody that their culture should be annihilated as was that of the Indians. When the children of European immigrants sought entry into schools and colleges financed in part by federal funds derived from land grants, they were beneficiaries of a bounty that was denied Puerto Ricans on the island, as well as the other three special minorities on the mainland.

Minority education has been presented conventionally as a tree without roots. Combining hardy growth with arrested development, the trunk as a whole persisted. Both its strengths and weaknesses, however, need to be more clearly related to the lights and shadows of the total environment and past.

In the present volume, each minority is first studied in the light of its earliest origins. The story of the education of black children begins with West Africa, that of Mexican-American children with preconquest Indian history. Attention is then directed to the historical conditions – primarily enslavement and conquest – under which the group was incorporated into American society. The economic and sociopolitical context of the group's participation or nonparticipation in community institutions is analyzed. Legal and other institutional constraints on the right of minority children to attend schools are examined, as are efforts of each group to overcome institutionalized obstacles and to provide schooling opportunities to minority children. Whenever possible, the children themselves are quoted in order to portray the fullest human impact of events in the strongest, most human terms.

Several issues repeatedly dealt with throughout the book include:

1. How did minority groups organize themselves to gain an effective voice in the education of their children?
2. Did entry into American society result in gains for each minority in contrast with the source society?
3. What were the specific bases for antagonism against the minorities by the dominant American society?
4. How did the schools adapt themselves to these antagonisms?
5. In what ways did the relative political subordination of minorities permit them to be forced to finance majority schools?
6. To what degree were legal rights enforced by government and school authorities?

A history of minority education would lose cogency were its attention fixed only on the minority people. At an early point, two more questions must be asked: Where and why did the exclusory patterns originate in the dominant society? And how did the exercise of discrimination affect the educational structures provided for majority children? A society that asserted belief in universal values also withheld the benefits of those values from millions of children. Such paradoxical behavior greatly weakened the reality of the values even for the majority. It never proved possible to instruct white American children in the imperatives of democracy in social institutions where it was held imperative that democracy not be practiced. Without a clear understanding of these situations, racial and ethnic discrimination in education can only be seen as the consequence of irrational or mistaken policies adopted by misguided individuals.

Another problem in the study of minority education is the ease with which majority children are assumed to enjoy common privileges. America is a race-conscious society. But it is also a class-ridden society in which economic differences and conflicts have long regulated the volume and quality of community services children enjoy. American political history – of which the history of public schools is a subdivision – testifies amply to the manipulation of racial issues so as to convince disadvantaged whites of their stake in the perpetuation of the color line. The error is not less if minority people indulge in it. Discrimination by class and by race is double deprivation. We cannot avoid the destructive effects of one by denying the existence of the other.

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The system of compulsory ignorance: black children to 1865

Alexander Crummell, whose father was a slave, said of slaveowners in the new world: “They began, at the first, a systematic ignoring of the fact of intellect in this abased people. They undertook the process of darkening their minds.”¹ American educational policy for slave children was “compulsory ignorance.”² Most never saw the inside of a school or received instruction. Ignorance was the primary instrument of enslavement. The minds of the slaves had not been darkened by ignorance when they were free men and women in their native lands. In West Africa, home of more than half the black slaves sold to America, formal education had existed at least since the sixteenth century.

During the sixteenth century, there was a great deal of formal education in traditional West Africa. But extensive institutionalized education appeared in large cities that came under Muslim influence. Islam meant literacy in Arabic and access to the broad range of Islamic scholarship. The Muslim universities in Timbuktu and Jenne, great cities of West Africa, were renowned throughout the Islamic world. Outside the royal and trading classes of the cities, in the great hinterland there was almost no formal education, but traditional education was common regardless of social divisions. Exclusion of anyone from the process of education was unthinkable. Instruction outside the Muslim world was conducted orally, with no reading or writing; it was available to all.

In eighteenth century West Africa, education ensured the continuation of traditional social and cultural life. Mastery of local customs and their religious significance was the universal goal: “Metal workers, weavers, boatmakers, drummers, warriors, and others had to be schooled not only in the material techniques of their respective crafts, but also in the spells, rituals, and other magic believed to be essential to success in their work.”³ Apprenticeship in a traditional craft followed family lines and extended from childhood to the eve of adulthood, when the new journeyman set himself up as a master craftsman.⁴

All this was destroyed under pressure of the world trade in slaves. During the eighteenth century alone, West Africa lost about 6.2 million people. Many were torn from their roots before they could be taught

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customs and crafts. The supply of slaves included hundreds of thousands of children. While no strict minimum age limit was established or respected, ten years of age is frequently mentioned in the slavers' literature as a rough measure of minimum acceptability. Not all were as old as ten. Children took up less room on the ships and were cheaper.

Of the 697,624 slaves counted in the 1790 census in America, about 200,000 were under ten; some of these children had been born in West Africa.⁵

When, in 1788, the scandal of inhuman conditions on the slave carriers penetrated the British Parliament, a bill was presented to establish minimum space requirements on the vessels. Slave merchants in Liverpool called the standards "ruinous." The final text of the law provided that if more than two-fifths of the human cargo were made up of children shorter than 4 feet 5 inches, then space for every five such children could be reckoned by the slayer as equal to the space for four adult slaves.⁶ A committee of the South Sea Company in 1717 noted that "children generally sell best on the Windward Coast [in the West Indies] where the people are very poor, and few can reach the price of a grown Negro."⁷

The African child arrived in the American slave market no longer a constructive member of a traditional local community, but an outcast-stranger whose role was to be used rather than to be useful. If he was taught to perform a task more effectively, it was because this would increase his economic value to someone else. The black minister H. Easton said, in 1830, that the slave's narrowly technical education was only "a collateral means by which he was rendered a more efficient machine."⁸ The African heritage was more than a word or song or prayer that could be transplanted into the new earth. It could thrive only in a context of local, kinship-based community life. Under slavery, this was impossible. African heritage became a sacred remnant, and none suffered the loss more grievously than the children.

A slave might be taught to read and write if his work required such skills; less often he was taught by his owner out of kindly regard. The conscience of later generations has led to a belief that this benevolence was fairly widespread. No ground can be found for such belief.

The process of darkening minds was most often enforced by private vigilance. "In 1821, Levi Coffin and his cousin, Vestal, opened a Sunday School for the blacks at New Garden [North Carolina] and began to teach some slaves to spell; but when they could spell words of two or three letters they were withdrawn by their masters."⁹

In colonial South Carolina, missionaries of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) met deep resistance among slaveholders to efforts toward Christianization of the slaves. To minimize opposition, SPG agents stressed work with women and children, whose economic value was less compelling, and made definite progress, even organizing classes