

Howard University

Digital Howard @ Howard University

Faculty Reprints

7-1-1936

Does Negro Education Need Reorganization And Redirection? - A Statement Of The Problem

Dwight O. W. Holmes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dh.howard.edu/reprints>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Holmes, Dwight O. W., "Does Negro Education Need Reorganization And Redirection? - A Statement Of The Problem" (1936). *Faculty Reprints*. 102.

<https://dh.howard.edu/reprints/102>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Reprints by an authorized administrator of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact digitalservices@howard.edu.

Does Negro Education Need Reorganization and Redirection?— A Statement of the Problem

D. O. W. HOLMES

This Yearbook is devoted to the consideration, from a number of different points of view, of the question: Does Negro education need reorganization and redirection at the present time? The task assigned to the writer of this analysis is to raise the primary issues involved in the discussion of the general topic proposed. In this presentation, therefore, questions are propounded but not discussed. The issues are raised but not debated. The article is intended, therefore, to specify and clarify but not to convince. The latter is the task of the other contributors to this Yearbook. Throughout the analysis the writer has attempted to state what his experience has convinced him to be crystallized attitudes on many basic matters concerning the education of the Negro as held by persons and groups both interested and influential in this field.

THE NEED FOR CRITICAL STOCK- TAKING

Because education is a dynamic thing it is subject to constant investigation and its progress must be frequently checked over with a view to modification. The schools which represent the institutional side of education constitute a very important and even indispensable part of our social machinery. Since society itself is a rap-

idly changing organism it follows that the schools cannot be static whether we conceive of their function as reflecting society as it is or as directing us to a social order as we think it should be.

America, during its comparatively brief existence as a nation, has shared not only the social changes of the world but, in many respects, has moved with greater velocity than the European nations because of the vigor of youth and the unrestrained freedom of the pioneer. This rapid movement in social development has been reflected in our schools which have evolved from the feeble beginnings of the early colonists into a system which, on all levels, has become a source of pride to us and of wonder to the rest of the world. Untrammelled by European traditions, vigorous young America has not only established the ideal of free, public, compulsory, universal education, available at all levels, but has actually proceeded far toward the realization of this ideal within a single century.

This amazing educational development, carried forward with such speed and in such a wide area, could hardly have been accomplished without important variations in ideals and procedures. But, since education in America, without the centralized national

control characteristic of European countries, is promoted by forty-eight sovereign states scattered over a wide area and peopled by a variety of racial stocks, the wonder is, not in the variation in form and practice, but in the similarity in pattern exhibited by the educational system of states as far apart, for example, as Maine and California and as different in climate and racial stock as Michigan and Florida. But whatever the difference in method and management there is one point at least on which there is agreement. As a whole, the American people seem generally satisfied with the broadly-stated objectives of their schools, based as they are upon the national ideal of democracy and equal opportunity for all. And in order to realize this ideal they willingly pay huge sums for the support of educational institutions from the kindergarten through the university in a manner which in some sections of the country approaches munificence. In their devotion to the belief that all men are born free and equal they have developed the schools on the theory that the most humble child might not be deprived of his elaborately-advertised chance to become a great captain of industry or the President of the United States.

Occasionally this satisfaction in our educational idealism and in the practices resulting therefrom has been disturbed by critics who question the validity of our basic assumptions and even more specifically, the pragmatic sanction for what we have been doing. These questions have often been raised by hard-headed business men who suspected that their own success had been due less to the effect of the

schools than to their own native genius and industry. It has occasionally been pointed out also by practical men that much of the work of the school is misdirected and wasteful, as indicated by the incompetence of many educated people in practical-life situations as compared with those who had received much less formal schooling. The defenders of the schools, in turn, have not only retorted that life is more than meat, but have hastened to show statistically that earning power is roughly proportional to the time spent in school and that the college man's chances for a place in "Who's Who" are much greater than are those with less formal education. This sort of controversy, whatever the merits of either position, has apparently had little effect upon America's faith in education; for from the year 1900 until the coming of the economic depression in 1929, the attendance in American schools constantly outran their capacity, so great was our belief that there lay the road to fame, fortune, happiness, and a white-collar job.

During the past two decades or more the scientific educator has entered this field of controversy and through more or less elaborate studies and surveys is himself raising many interesting questions concerning the philosophies and practices characteristic of our schools. The development of measuring instruments of various kinds and the application of the survey technique have, in many cases, enabled him to confirm what many laymen and not a few educators had, for a long time, suspected, namely, that our educational philosophy and practice, as is true of any other social enterprise, call for some fundamental

overhauling and reorganization from time to time, in order that our school machinery might operate with the greatest efficiency in view of our changing conditions. As a result of these questionings we find ourselves today in the midst, not only of educational investigation, but of actual and basic educational reform. The growth of the junior-high-school movement is a case in point. The revolutionary experiment in education on the collegiate level, now in process at the University of Chicago, is another indication of our desire to make improvements in our educational procedures, even though the change is in opposition to traditional practice. The plan of alternating classroom instruction with experience in the world of action as operated at Antioch College, is still a third evidence of our willingness to recognize that changes in educational conception, organization, and procedure, however radical, may be justified by changing conditions and increased knowledge.

That education is being more and more asked by laymen to state exactly where it is going and why and how it expects to get there is a sign that the schools are of vital interest to mankind. That educators themselves are accepting the challenge and taking the lead in self-examination is a sign of vitality; for only the spiritually and mentally dead find no fault in themselves and hence refuse to change. This attitude of laymen and professionals means that there is nothing in education too good to become out-moded; no practice in the schools too effective to be improved upon; no philosophy too sacred to be attacked; no belief too stable to be overthrown.

THE DEFINITION OF "NEGRO EDUCATION"

The Civil War brought into active being a new factor in the American educational equation. The Emancipation of the Negro and the social philosophy of the South made necessary the development of what practically amounts to separate systems of schools for the two races. In the Southern part of the United States, therefore, where a large majority of the Negro population resides, the dual system of education is at the present time a legal requirement and a generally-enforced social policy. The states making up this area are Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. In addition, there is considerable separation of the races in schools without legal compulsion in other states bordering this area, especially in their Southern counties, as in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana, and even in such important cities as Trenton, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, Columbus, and Cincinnati. This practice gives rise to problems in education peculiar to such a situation, problems which do not appear in those areas where the separation of the two races in schools is neither a legal requirement nor a social policy. As a result, Negro schools are not only confronted with the same problems as schools in general but, in addition, must meet and solve those arising from the policy that demands that they be conducted as units separate from those patronized by the white people of the same communities.

Since the states supporting two systems of schools are, in general, the poorest economically, and hence the least able to afford the extra expense involved, such problems as the distribution of public school funds between the two races, the enforcement of compulsory education laws, the qualifications of teachers of different races who are required to do the same work on different salary scales, and others of similar nature become acute and are constantly forcing themselves, through painful experience, upon the attention of the Negroes. At the same time, these problems demand the most earnest attention of the general public, of organized philanthropy, of the state and local legislative bodies concerned, and most of all of the school officials operating in the areas of separate schools who bear the heavy responsibility of supervising the education of the whole people in a democracy while preserving at the same time the principle of racial segregation in schools. For purposes of effective action in such a complex situation, the student of education must supply the necessary facts. These segregated schools with their students, faculties and problems of management, curricula and support, when taken together, constitute what is meant by "Negro Education."

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Seventy years ago the Negro found himself emancipated from slavery and endowed, at least in theory, with all the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. While some Negroes before the Civil War had learned to read and write and a few individuals had progressed considerably in learning, yet the best authorities consider it ex-

tremely doubtful that as much as ten per cent of the Negro population were literate in 1865. Many, of course, had received training in the crafts by working on the job, thus developing considerable skill in the mechanic arts. For practical purposes, however, it is probably fair to say that the race began its formal education at the close of the Civil War very close to the zero point. In spite of the efforts of several of the reconstruction governments to promote education without the segregation feature, the social attitude of the South demanded and finally obtained, by 1870, the complete separation of the races in the use of the comparatively meager educational facilities offered throughout the area of the former slave states.

Immediately following the close of the War the schools for Negroes were provided largely through the zeal of Northern philanthropists who insisted that the recently emancipated race should be educated, first, to save it from degenerating into savagery; second, to compensate it in part for its exploitation under the slave regime which had tacitly been endorsed for over two centuries by the entire nation; third, to provide its own trained leadership; fourth, to prepare it for effective citizenship. Because of the poverty and disorganization of the South, attempts to establish public schools in that area for either race were feeble at first, but following the lead of the more fortunate states, gradually gained momentum during the 1870's. At the same time public schools for Negroes slowly developed along with public schools for the white population as that region haltingly recovered economically and socially

from the devastating effects of the war. From these beginnings we find today, in the United States, over 100 institutions for Negroes designated as colleges enrolling over 25,000 students; 2,000 high schools for Negroes enrolling approximately 150,000 students; and a large number of elementary schools attended by between one-and-a-half and two million pupils.

THE QUESTION OF THE SEGREGATED SCHOOL

It would seem that the first question that should arise in the mind of any critical educator with reference to this "system" of Negro schools is the validity of the segregated school itself. It must be remembered, of course, that schools for Negroes are not the only segregated schools in the United States. The Roman Catholics maintain schools of all grades in many parts of America, ranging from the elementary level through the university. In many instances the Catholic parochial schools rival and at times surpass the schools supported from public funds. Denominational Protestant colleges are also scattered throughout the nation and are well supported by their respective church organizations. These facts give ample evidence that separate schools for particular groups are no novelty. The distinguishing feature of the separate Negro school, however, is the fact that this species of segregation is compulsory and, therefore, in the minds of many, undemocratic and contrary to the spirit of American ideals. The critical educators of both races, therefore, should carefully take into account this basic feature of Negro education from the standpoint of its social validity, keeping in mind the

ultimate implications of compulsory, segregated schools in light of the fundamental ideals of Americanism.

At least three distinct attitudes on the justifiability of separate schools are held by persons in this country who give serious attention to this subject.

The first group consists of many Negroes and some white people who believe that educational segregation is absolutely wrong both in principle and in practice. They argue (1) that since segregation is based upon the assumption of basic superiority and inferiority any race or group that accepts segregation without protest endorses and admits its own inferior status; (2) that since those in power segregate only persons who are socially unacceptable and dangerous such as the criminal, the insane, and the diseased, the segregation of the Negro places him in this class; (3) that racial segregation in schools is particularly vicious because it promotes rather than abates racial antagonism by preventing the association of individuals of different groups at a time when they should learn to know each other in normal intellectual association, thus inhibiting the free interchange of the best that each race has to offer the other.

A second group, composed primarily of white people, endorse segregation and believe that in communities where Negroes become noticeable by their numbers the separation of the two races, in all social relationships, is not only inevitable but wise. A majority of this group justifies its attitude by its belief in the necessity of preserving the integrity of the dominant race. Many of them think also that, entirely

aside from this consideration, the Negro is better circumstanced when segregated and that a system of Negro schools gives him opportunities for leadership experience not otherwise possible. A large majority of such people are willing to endorse the education of the Negro at all levels in segregated schools in the Southern area and in all schools in other areas so long as his presence is not offensive in any way to the majority group.

A third group of thinkers on this subject, consisting mostly of Negroes, accept social segregation in the American situation as inevitable and recognize educational segregation as a necessary corollary. This school of thought feels, therefore, that a virtue should be made of necessity through the exploitation of the South's segregation philosophy by persuading it to make generous grants for Negro education in order to prevent persistent and annoying protest. Expediency is its social philosophy.

We have had 70 years of experimentation with the system of segregation. We have seen it creep beyond the borders of the Southern states and invade Northern territory. Enough data are probably available to aid the student in forecasting the result of the persistent elaboration of the dual system of schools. Whether its continuation and extension shall be generally approved by thoughtful educators of both races or whether it shall be condemned and a persistent attempt made, first, to limit and finally to abolish the separation of the races in schools, seems to be the necessary point of departure in any discussion of the topic proposed.

Whatever the answer to this ques-

tion, it is still true, first, that the dual system does exist at the present time; and, second, that without some form of social upheaval, which none can foresee at the present time, the mass of the Negroes of the United States must depend for some years to come upon the segregated system of schools for its education. Having before us this stark realism, several important questions relative to the education of the Negro immediately confront us. These will be referred to in the following order: (1) Aims and Objectives; (2) Curricular Content; (3) Organization.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Education has always faced a difficult task in defining its aims and objectives, partly because they are so numerous and so nebulous and partly because they overlap to such an extent as to obscure the lines of demarkation. It is obvious, too, that broadly inclusive definitions, designed to escape these difficulties, are extremely unsatisfying either for purposes of discussion or as guides to action. Such expressions as "developing the whole man," "preparing for citizenship," "teaching people how to think," as statements of educational objectives, have little meaning to a person developing a curriculum or devising a method of procedure. It is fairly agreed, however, that formal education can and should do at least three things for a student. (1) It should enable him to do better whatever he attempts to do; (2) it should enlarge his intellectual horizon and enrich his life; and (3) it should increase his capacity to make a living. The first provides for the improvement of general social conduct;

the second for the enlargement of the personal life; the third for economic efficiency. The American educational philosophy provides, too, that the only limitation that should be permitted to retard the student's progress in reaching these three objectives is his own capacity and industry.

In considering Negro education in view of these aims and objectives, two main lines of reasoning are possible. One school of thought takes the position that the education of Negroes should differ in no respect whatever from the education of white people, since any change of a social, mechanical or cultural nature that affects the American people as a whole likewise affects the Negro. According to this view, those in charge of the education of the Negro must merely keep abreast of the times and follow the educational adjustments made by our schools in general in order to meet the demands made by changes in the world of action. Many Negroes and some white people take this view, not a few of whom are zealots for social justice. Naturally this school of thought believes also in the identity-of-opportunity theory which denies that class, race or any other accidental circumstance or condition should in any way limit the rights and privileges of an individual. Thus are the social and educational philosophies of this group held consistent.

A second group shares this view of essential spiritual and intellectual equality and the consequent ultimate requirement of equality of educational opportunity. It takes the position, however, that since the majority and dominant racial group in America does not hold this view, at the present time,

where race is concerned, the Negro is confronted not by a theory but by a condition which must be dealt with realistically. This group would survey the Negro population, for example, in order to find out how many Negro doctors, lawyers, preachers, and teachers are needed to serve the race on the assumption that persons of color, save in the rarest exceptions, will not be allowed to serve professionally the needs of the white race. They point out, regretfully, of course, that the Negro is doomed to the servant status in his relations with white people, that he has no chance to become a bank director or a railroad president unless a Negro bank or a Negro railroad offers the opportunity, and that since such opportunities are extremely limited, it is folly to encourage the unlimited preparation of Negro youth to function in situations that do not exist. Marcus Garvey held this philosophy and offered migration as the only solution. Today we hear increasingly of the forty-ninth state as the way out.

Merely to mention these two views is to indicate that the problem of aims and objectives, when applied to Negro education, is not only an extension of the general problem but probably an entirely different kind of problem as well.

CURRICULAR CONTENT

One would naturally expect to find that the curricular offerings of Negro schools vary in accordance with the attitudes of the several communities with reference to the two views just stated. This, however, is not the case or else everybody influencing Negro education belongs to the first group of thinkers. For, starting with the mis-

sionary schools first founded in the South on the New England pattern, the schools for Negroes have persistently followed, in general, the courses of study and the methods prevalent at the time in American schools as a whole. A large majority of the institutions of higher learning for Negroes, for example, differ from the neighboring white schools only in size, cost, and the complexion of the students and teachers. Exactly the same courses are being taught in the same way. The same is true at the secondary level except that a larger proportion of schools for Negroes are "manual-training-schools," at least, in name, although such institutions often offer classical curricula. Naturally one would expect little difference in schools for the two races at the elementary level and finds practically none, the offerings always consisting of the same tool subjects in both sets of schools.

Any student of this subject might raise some pertinent questions on this point and many have actually done so. Thus, Woodson in his thought-provoking book *The Mis-Education of the Negro* says:

Negroes who have been so long inconvenienced and denied opportunities for development are naturally afraid of anything that sounds like discrimination. They are anxious to have everything the white man has even if it is harmful. The possibility of originality in the Negro, therefore, is discounted one hundred per cent to maintain a nominal equality. If the whites decide to take up Mormonism the Negroes must follow their lead. If the whites neglect such a study, then the Negroes must do likewise.

The author, however, does not have such an attitude. He considers the educational system as it has developed both in Europe and America an antiquated process which does not hit the mark even in the case of

the needs of the white man himself. If the white man wants to hold on to it, let him do so; but the Negro, so far as he is able, should develop and carry out a program of his own.

Here is the view of a Negro intellectual, highly trained, widely experienced, and extensively traveled. He advocates a different training for the Negro for two reasons: first, the white man's education is a failure; and second, on account of many factors, the Negro's education presents a peculiar problem.

If what he says is valid, Negro education most emphatically needs reorganization and redirection. But is it valid? If not, where are the fallacies in the quoted statement and many others appearing in the same book? The reason for the tendency toward imitation, deplored by Woodson, is not hard to find. The Negro, recognizing in himself a minority group, seriously disadvantaged in the American scene, naturally strives to emulate his white neighbor who, in his eyes, possesses everything worth having. He believes that the white man's education has made him great and powerful and wishes to drink of that same draught without adulteration. It is a natural attitude and one that it will require much logic and more persuasive eloquence to destroy. Shall educators definitely set about changing this attitude and advocate a definitely different curriculum for Negro schools? And, if so, what shall be substituted for the one discarded? This is a fertile field for exploration.

It should be noted here that those who advocate specially-adapted curricula for Negro schools justify their attitude on one or more of the following grounds:

1. The Negro's cultural and economic opportunities in life are so circumscribed in the American situation that it is unfair to educate him for a life he cannot lead. This view is taken by many highly-educated white leaders who consider themselves very friendly to the Negro. This philosophy rather than attack racial proscription at its source, chooses the easier way of making the Negro insensitive to it through selected education.
2. The Negro's education should, at present, be largely vocational since any backward people must first learn to make a living on the lower levels. Only prospective "leaders" need any other kind of schooling.
3. The Negro's education should be different from that of his white neighbor because he is mentally incapable of assimilating the lore of the highly-civilized Caucasian.

Negro intellectuals deplore the first proposition, question the second and refute the third. Here, however, is food for thought and material for discussion.

ORGANIZATION

Again, in organization, we find the Negro schools following closely the American pattern. In fact, at the elementary and secondary levels, since they are part of the public school systems of the several states, there is little else for them to do. It is quite possible that even here some improvement might be suggested which might prove advantageous to the Negro schools. For example, the Negro schools can hardly follow the consolidation-movement without great loss

unless transportation facilities are furnished with equal generosity for pupils of both races. This has never been done.

The question of reorganization, however, has been most persistently raised in recent years at the higher level where about half the colleges are supported by philanthropy. Because there are so many small colleges for Negroes, poorly supported and poorly located, it has been suggested that some sort of coördination of effort be attempted in the interest of efficiency. This might take the form of such consolidations and affiliations as has actually occurred at New Orleans and Atlanta; or the functions of some of the institutions of higher learning for Negroes might be radically changed so as to prevent overlapping and more equitably to distribute desirable activities. The arguments in favor of such reorganization seem convincing when the facts and figures are presented. Yet it must be remembered that while there is one white college student to every 100 of the population, one Negro college student represents approximately 500 Negroes. This means that white people attend college five times as frequently as do Negroes in proportion to the population. Some may consider this the proper ratio; others, may take it to mean that more Negroes should go to college. Should they reach the rate of attendance of the white college student, not only would our colleges be crowded but the total number would have to be considerably increased.

SUMMARY

The object of this article has been to state, in broad outline but occa-

sionally with specific references, the question for discussion in the present issue of the Yearbook. Out of this statement several questions have been raised and others suggested which might well direct the thinking of the several contributors. These may be briefly repeated as follows:

1. Is it desirable to raise the question of reorganizing or redirecting Negro education just at the present time? or
2. Is it not best to give this field a rest while it recovers from the effects of the economic depression?
3. Is there anything about general education or Negro education that is so firmly established and so generally endorsed as to require no re-examination?
4. Since the whole idea of "Negro Education" arises from the American policy of racial segregation, should the discussion question the validity of segregation itself?
5. Since any conclusions reached concerning Number 4 must, for the present, remain in the realm of the academic, is it the wisest course to accept segregation as inevitable and build our philosophy of Negro education within the framework of that assumption? or
6. Should we attempt, in the education of the Negro, to do the best we can under the circumstances in preparation for present needs and at the same time leave open the avenues for a "divine discontent" and equip him intellectually and spiritually to contend for everything that intelligent men have fought for throughout history?
7. Should the curricular offerings of schools for Negroes differ essentially from those of other schools in the same areas at the elementary, the secondary, the collegiate, the professional, or the graduate levels, and in what way?
8. Do the results of the seventy-year-old experiment in Negro education indicate that it has been, generally speaking, a failure? or
9. Is it true that the "remarkable progress made by the Negro since emancipation" that we hear so much about is due to the high standards of education set by the New Englanders who promoted the first schools for Negroes in the wake of the Northern Armies?
10. Should the Negro's present prospects in life determine to any degree the offerings of Negro schools?
11. Is it possible that the Negro, though innately the mental equal of the white man, has suffered an intellectual conditioning through the very fact of segregation that makes him appear intellectually inferior?
12. What changes in the organization and distribution of our colleges are desirable?

A discussion of these issues and others that may be suggested should throw considerable light upon the problem before us and furnish valuable material for effective action.