

Detroit Schools

What do They Teach?

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1972

Editors' note: The writer has worked as a full-time teacher in an inner-city elementary school in Detroit for the past three years.

For some years, the Detroit public school system has attempted to rationalize its failures to the community with the excuse of inadequate funding.

Today, with Detroit schools threatened by a complete shutdown due to financial shortages, this explanation is once again being offered by school officials to meet public protests over conditions in the city's schools.

If only voters will approve the necessary tax increases, school officials tell us, our children can receive a full and useful education.

But it will take far more than additional funding to turn Detroit schools into worthwhile institutions, capable of giving students a meaningful education which they can use in years to come. The failings of the system go far beyond the current, and very real, financial crisis.

Perhaps the most basic flaw in the prevailing philosophy of the public school system is a cultural bias which places black and poor children at a crippling disadvantage, from the day they enter the schools.

BIASED TESTING USED

One example of this is the statewide achievement test used in Detroit schools to measure "students' learning progress." Detroit students in recent years have scored poorly on these tests, when compared with schoolchildren from suburban and out-of-state communities.

Dr. John Porter, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, has justified the use of the tests, saying that their purpose "is to provide general information to local educators, only to help them learn the needs of their students."

But anyone who seriously uses these test results to "learn the needs of their students" is in trouble—or at least their students are. These tests are biased against inner-city children, ignore personality growth and development, and bear little relation to how ideas and concepts are taught in the schools.

Many inner-city children have basic learning handicaps which these tests ignore, and which the school system in general does not deal with. A child who comes from a poor family, who often goes to school hungry and ill-clothed, and whose family situation is confused, is at an obvious disadvantage compared to a child from a middle-class home in the suburbs.

Moreover, what a student is being taught to read or write bears heavily on his or her ability to respond to the classroom experience. Only very recently can a child pick up a reader in a city school and see a picture of a black child, or read about an experience which relates to urban life. Not surprisingly, most inner-city students do not respond well to such biased images.

OFFICIALS DEFEND STATUS QUO

Yet many Detroit school officials seem untroubled by these concerns. Speaking on the use of the statewide achievement tests, Assistant Supt. Stuart Rankin said: "Any student who comes from a home where parents are well-educated, where there is plenty of reading material and where there is solid support for learning, will do well on test scores."

No doubt Dr. Rankin is right. But in my entire class of 36 students, there is probably not one child who has a parent whom Dr. Rankin would consider "well-educated."

In short, the basic logic of the school's system penalizes a child's home situation does not meet the standards of school officials.

Other progress and achievement tests, used to evaluate students on an individual basis, continue this pattern of cultural, racial and sexual bias.

The Iowa and SCAT-STEP Tests, for example, are used in Detroit schools to determine whether a child will progress to high school, and if so, what program he or she will pursue there.

The tests are part of the so-called "tracking system," a program which amounts to making it as difficult as possible for working-class and poor children to get into college-preparatory programs.

The track system is so discriminatory that one large city, Washington D.C., was forced to drop tracking recently because of a court order.

Why, it might be asked, do the schools continue to give these achievement tests, when it is generally acknowledged that they are culturally biased against a large group of children? Why frustrate children with a test which does not relate to their needs, background and experience?

Yet these test scores continue to be regarded as a "scientific tool" for measuring educational progress by school officials.

The plain fact is that our schools are run with middle-class values in mind, with definite and oppressive ideas of success and failure. The inner-city child must adjust to fit the mold created by his teachers and administrators—or be judged a failure.

Here is one personal example: one girl who had moved to six different schools in three years, and who had fallen far behind what was "expected" of her. Leslie was intelligent and sensitive, but because her reading skills were low, she had been labeled "stupid" by a previous teacher. Leslie told me she intended to quit school when she turned 12, "because school was dumb." Sadly, she probably will.

Many other examples could be given. The basic logic of the situation points to one central conclusion: public schools place poor children, black and white alike, in an environment which is alien to their whole range of experiences, which assumes cultural values they do not have, and which ultimately frustrates and brutalizes these children, reinforcing the insecurity and self-hate which cripples so many poor children.

This is a crisis which cannot be cured by money alone. It finds its source at the very roots of the entire system: the class and race backgrounds of the people who shape the goals and priorities of the public schools.

And the problem will not be touched until the power to define those priorities rests with the community, not with in elite of bureaucrats.

fifth Estate

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/173-december-16-1972-january-5-1973/detroit-schools>
Fifth Estate #173, December 16, 1972-January 5, 1973

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net