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“To me, the typical urban child has little to look forward to. The parks, the museums, the libraries are not, he knows, for him” - Lois Mark Stalvey

The Urban Child: Getting Ready for Failure

by LOIS MARK STALVEY, *Writer, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.*

ABSTRACT. This paper is the result of my personal experiences in Philadelphia's predominantly black public schools, both as a white parent of three children and as a volunteer teacher. It mentions the benefits to our white middle-class children from their 12 years in these schools, but also describes the far-different treatment of their black classmates—much of which is unsuspected by educators who could make necessary changes. This paper suggests a solution that could be implemented in a matter of months with little effort and no financial cost.

MY GREATEST CONCERN about the environment of the urban child is that adults who could improve this environment are kept from knowing the urban child who needs change most. It was only through a series of accidents that I learned that the majority of urban children are not like my white middle-class WASP kids, but are children who see and *are seen* in an unconsciously different way.

My expertise is simply that of a mother who for the last 13 years has raised three children in the urban environment of Philadelphia's predominantly black public schools. My husband and I moved from an all-WASP Omaha suburb in 1962 because we felt our children would be handicapped in the suburban environment. We believed they should be getting ready to live in a multiethnic, multiclass world. When we chose an integrated neighborhood in Philadelphia, we had no idea that the schools would gradually turn black around our children—that indeed our oldest son would eventually be the only white boy in his classes in a 4,000-student senior high school. Had we known of the crises we would have to face, and of our own fears and unconscious racism that we would be forced to confront, I wonder if we would have proceeded. In the end, our children (and their parents) benefited greatly, but I will not attempt to describe the step-by-step process.

Anyone interested in these details can find them in my books, *The Education of a WASP* (Stalvey 1971) and *Getting Ready - The Education of a White Family in Inner-City Schools* (Stalvey 1975).

More pertinent to the subject of this symposium is what I learned about my children's classmates and friends and of the environment in which they must live. In the interest of brevity, I will try to give you an accurate composite picture. If the picture seems too shocking to be true, again, I must refer you for documentation to the details in *Getting Ready*.

Our composite child (whom I will call George) is far different from my own children. To my children, the urban environment does indeed mean parks, museums, and historical sites; it means also the respect of their public school teachers and administrators. It is for a small number of children like mine that urban institutions seem to be created and operated. It is black children like George, however, who constitute 62 percent of Philadelphia's public school population. He lives approximately 6 blocks away and attends the same school in the same classes with the same teachers as my children, yet George lives in a world it took me 6 years to understand.

George is about 14 years old. His parents probably graduated from a high school, but, as

we shall see, a high school diploma in many urban schools is about as useful and genuine as counterfeit money. George's mother must work, either to supplement her husband's income or because her husband is dead, has deserted, or is ill. She may also be working to help pay for a house in a "better" neighborhood with a "better" school than the last three schools that quickly decayed when white families fled. To George, "nature" consists of the rats and cockroaches his family fights constantly. George does not go to city parks; his older brother was killed in one by a rival gang.

And so George does not go out often, certainly not to hear music groups at Philadelphia's Spectrum. There are many other places George cannot go if they are on the "turf" of a gang not of his own neighborhood. George is not a gang member himself. He would like to join one for his own protection, but his mother has pleaded with him not to become involved. He is trying to keep his promise in spite of the constant recruiting threats and blandishments of his local gang. George has little choice but to stay in the house and watch television. George cannot read.

I got to know over a dozen children like George when I was a volunteer teacher for a so-called Disciplinary Problem Class of 8th-graders in the school my own children attended. We held discussions on everything from sex to black history. By the end of the year, I found that these children who had been labeled "bad" were, with me, friendly, cooperative, and quick-witted. One child had taught himself several foreign languages by practising with neighborhood merchants; another could do complex math problems in his head. Two weeks before "my" class was to graduate along with our son, I discovered a secret they had skillfully kept hidden from me. Most of these children were being graduated from our elementary school unable to read. They were going into our enormous (4000-student) high school with no possibility at all for further education.

It was my 13-year old son who answered my rhetorical question, "How *can* these kids go through the same classes with most of the same teachers as you and not be taught to read?" Spike, who had been in those classes when no supervisor, researcher, or other adult except the teacher was present, explained in detail why children like George could not read. Spike spoke

as an insider; he had looked and listened for 8 years. He had watched the teachers ignore certain children or make fun of them if they tried to participate in class discussions; he had noticed which children were sent to help the janitor—not the white, light, bright children, but the kids who were slow. "Some of those kids", Spike said, "were never *in* class long enough to learn anything!" Spike reported that if *he* talked in class, he was gently reprimanded, but if a lower-income black child talked, he was sent to spend the day on the detention bench.

My son noted also that *no one* ever repeated a grade. "Even the really dumb kids were just passed along to the next grade", he told me.

I learned to become an outraged cynic about special programs for so-called "deprived" children. When teachers were asked to select children for a well-funded, well-designed program to encourage reading, my children and the children of the black professionals were chosen. When a state teachers' college invited "deprived" children for a weekend on campus so that the students could get to know their future pupils, again only the middle-class children were sent. Our children quickly learned to say no to special projects, hoping their places would be given to children who needed the benefits more.

Our school did offer one advantage that black children in the completely black ghettos did not have: Because of a handful of vocal white and not-easily-threatened black parents, we got fewer teachers fresh out of teachers' college. These inexperienced teachers are usually assigned to the lowest income areas where, in all logic, the *most* experienced teachers are needed. These young, idealistic new teachers often become disillusioned quickly when they are unable to cope. They leave in a few months. Many children I know have had five or more teachers in one school year.

After these experiences, I read the costly studies by experts with sadness and rage. My 13-year-old son had explained only too clearly why children fail.

George's future affects the future of all children. Children like George will make the world a lot more dangerous and unpleasant than it needs to be. Crime does not start in the streets; it starts in the classrooms, where teacher neglect precludes an honest way to earn

a living and where teacher brutality breeds rage.

"Teacher brutality" and "teacher neglect" are harsh, shocking phrases. Again, I must refer you to *Getting Ready* for documentation. Along with the brutal, there are certainly many diligent, caring teachers, but their jobs are made harder, if not impossible, by colleagues who provide, at best, custodial care for helpless urban children. Then, between the caring and the brutal teacher, there is another: the teacher whose unconscious racism convinces her she is doing a good job with basically worthless children. Her or his brutality produces only emotional bruises; his or her neglect is skillfully rationalized. Still, the outspoken racist and the unconscious racist are the teachers whose views of urban children threaten us all.

I say I have no sure-cure solutions, but I did stumble across a small news item that could help us begin. It reported a court case in Mississippi where teachers challenged (and lost their case against) a ruling that *all those holding jobs in public schools must send their own children to the public schools*. U.S. District Court Judge Alan C. Keady ruled that this policy was not only constitutional, but "based on logic". To those who protest that this policy in Mississippi restricts freedom of choice, may I suggest that this condition of employment is indeed as logical as preferring Catholic teachers in Catholic schools or expecting the president of General Motors *not* to drive a Ford. If the public schools are not good enough for the children of the teachers, then they are not good enough for anyone's children and must be changed.

Perhaps we have all been naive with our bus-ing programs, which often only send children's bodies to teachers with segregating eyes. If a Mississippi Plan existed and was enforced in our northern cities, dedicated teachers could still go home to the suburbs each night, but they would

at least have an investment in the city public schools. Their children would tell them what mine have told me; they would know *why* their colleagues are not teaching kids like George to read. Their adults' view of the urban child's environment would be real at last. And if *one* teacher's child is in a classroom, I can assure you that the quality of teaching would improve immediately for *all* the children in the class - out of professional pride if not out of professional protection.

Unfortunately for children like George, it seems unlikely that school systems will adopt a Mississippi Plan. Teachers' unions are too strong; Board of Education members are unlikely to demand of others what they shrink from doing themselves. More and more "liberal" whites who demonstrated for integration in the South are fleeing from integration in the North. People who express outrage over school riots send their own children to private schools. And so, people with knowledge of their own hypocrisy quietly protect each other.

To me, the typical urban child has little to look forward to. The parks, the museums, the libraries are not, he knows, for him. The success models in George's environment are the pimp, the pusher, and the professional mugger. We have given George no other way to succeed. Some dark night, any of us may meet George. Because we have never gotten to know what his life is really like, George is getting ready to show us what's true.

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