

Grace Lee Boggs - Education: The Great Obsession

This essay was originally published in the September 1970 issue of [Monthly Review](#).



Education today is a great obsession. It is also a great necessity. We, all of us, black and white, yellow and brown, young and old, men and women, workers and intellectuals, have a great deal to learn about ourselves and about the rapidly changing world in which we live. We, all of us, are far from having either the wisdom or the skills that are now more than ever required to govern ourselves and to administer things.

In the present struggle for a new system of education to fulfill this pressing need, the black community constitutes the decisive social force because it is the black community that the present educational system has most decisively failed.

Shortly after the 1969 school term opened, James Allen, the U.S. Commissioner of Education, proclaimed a crash program for the 1970s that showed that he was not equipped to get this country out of its mounting educational crisis. Ten years from now, Allen solemnly promised (or threatened), no child will leave school without being able to read well

enough to meet the demands of job and society. The United States has had free public education for over a century. For nearly half a century practically every youngster has been required by federal law to attend school until the age of sixteen. Enough teachers and school facilities exist to support this compulsion. Yet the only goal the U.S. Commissioner of Education has been able to set is the kind already surpassed by literacy drives in new nations where, prior to independence, the great majority of the people never even had schools to go to. For the world and country in which we live, Allen would have been more relevant if he had promised that by the end of the 1970s every school child would be fluent in a second language like Chinese, Russian, or Spanish.

Like other administration programs, Allen's is, of course, a pacification program, aimed at cooling the complaints of personnel managers who are obsessed by the apparent inability of job applicants to fill out employment forms; high school and college instructors who tear out their hair over student errors in spelling and punctuation; and the great majority of Americans, including many vocal black parents, who are still naive enough to believe that if black children could only read they could get better jobs and stop roaming the streets.

Allen's ten-year program will not bring tangible benefits to these complainants. The people who stand to gain most from it are the professional educators who are already lining up for the million-dollar grants that will enable reading experts and testers to test black children, find them wanting, and therefore justify more million-dollar grants to these reading experts to repeat the same remedial reading and compensatory programs that have consistently proved useless.

Since these professional educators are the chief beneficiaries, they are naturally the chief propagators of certain myths about education, which are unfortunately shared by most Americans. Chief among these are the myths (1) that the fundamental purpose of education in an age of abundance is to increase *earning* power; (2) that the achievement level of children can be defined and measured by their response to words on a printed page; (3) that schools are the best and only place for people to get an education, and therefore that the more young people are compelled to attend school and the more extended the period that they are compelled to attend, the more educated they will become.

The rebellions in secondary schools and colleges during the past few years are a sign that young people, black and white, have already begun to reject these myths. Seventy-five percent of secondary schools have already experienced these rebellions to one degree or another. During the next ten years the struggle to destroy these myths root and branch will continue to escalate. In the black community the struggle will probably take place under the general umbrella of the struggle for community control of schools. In the white community it will probably be around issues of student rights to freedom of dress, speech, assembly, and press. But whatever the focus, any educators, black or white, professional or

paraprofessional, who continue to try to run the schools by these myths, will find themselves increasingly resorting to force and violence and/or drugs like Ritalin to keep youth quiet in school and/or to keep so-called troublemakers and trouble out.

How It Developed

The above myths represent the attempt of the public school system to adjust to the changing needs of the American capitalist system over the past fifty years. Because the present school system is so huge and so resistant to change, we tend to think that it has existed forever. Actually it is only about two generations old. In nineteenth-century America (and in Western Europe until the end of the Second World War), the school system was organized to prepare the children of the well-born and well-to-do to govern over the less well-born and not so well-to-do. Thus, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, only 6 percent of U.S. youth graduated from high school.

Early in the twentieth century the mass public school system was developed to assimilate an essentially immigrant working population into the economic, social, and political structure of the American Way of Life. According to this Way, known as American Democracy, those closest to the Founding Fathers in background and culture rule over those who have the furthest to go in achieving this ultimate goal and who meanwhile need to be inculcated with a Founding-Father complex.

To accomplish this objective the schools were organized:

1. To give the children of workers elementary skills in the three Rs that would enable them to function as workers in an industrial society.
2. To give these children proper reverence for the four As: American History, American Technology, the American Free Enterprise System, and American Democracy.
3. To provide a smoothly functioning sifting-mechanism whereby, as Colin Green has phrased it, the “winners” could automatically be sorted from the “losers”;¹ that is to say, whereby those individuals equipped by family background and personality to finish high school and go on to college could be selected out from among the great majority on their way to the labor market after a few years of elementary school, or at most a year or so of high school.

This automatic separator worked quite well during the first half of this century. It was acceptable to the European immigrants whose children constituted the core of the urban school population and who, in appreciation for the opportunity to come to the Land of Opportunism, felt the responsibility was *theirs* to become integrated or assimilated into the American Way of Life.

Proceeding from this premise, working-class children from Eastern and Southern European stock (the “losers”) dropped out of school quietly around the age of fourteen or fifteen, while the exceptions or “winners,” usually those from WASP or Northern European stock, finished high school in preparation for college, which would qualify them to become doctors or lawyers or engineers or teachers. The high-school curriculum and staff were set up on the basis of this implicit stratification. With such elite, highly motivated students, high school teachers had only to know a subject well enough and drill it deep enough into the heads of students so that they would feed it back on college entrance exams.

Thus in 1911 only 11 percent of the high-school-age population was in school; in 1920 only 20 percent. Not until 1930 did the number reach the relatively mass proportion of 51 percent.²

During the 1930s, with the shrinking of the unskilled and child labor market, some kinks began to develop in this automatic sorting mechanism. But these were ironed out temporarily when the high schools expanded their skills curriculum to meet the needs of an increasingly technical society, including such subjects as typing and shop, and simultaneously putting greater emphasis on basketball and football in which the children of workers could excel and develop enough sense of belonging not to upset the applecart.

By 1940, 73 percent of high-school-age youngsters, hopeful of gaining higher skills and thus escaping the back-breaking, insecure jobs of their blue-collar parents, were attending high school. Those who dropped out before graduation—which for the last thirty years has averaged approximately one-half of all those entering ninth grade and at least two-thirds of black youth—could, if they were white, still find such useful jobs as delivery or stock boys, or helpers of various kinds in the many small businesses that still existed, thus adding to the family income. Or they could just make themselves useful around the house doing the chores not yet outmoded by labor-saving devices. During the war years, with a maximum of twelve million Americans in the armed services, there were jobs aplenty for their younger brothers and sisters.

It was not until after the Second World War, and particularly in the 1950s and '60s, that the American school system began to find itself in deep trouble. The Andy Hardy world of the 1930s was disappearing. Mechanization of agriculture and wartime work had brought millions of families to the cities from the farms and from the South—including blacks and Appalachian whites who had heretofore been getting their education catch-as-catch can. With the automation of industry following the Second World War and the Korean War, the swallowing up of small family businesses by big firms, and the widespread use of labor-saving appliances in the average home, the labor of the dropout teenager became surplus and the adolescent became highly visible.

What now should be done with these “losers”? The obvious solution was to keep them in school. Thus, instead of the high schools acting as automatic sifters to sort out the “losers,” they were turned into mass custodial institutions to keep everyone in the classroom and off the streets. If at the same time some could also be trained for white-collar jobs, that was a fringe benefit. For the great majority in the high schools, skills training played the same supplementary role that it plays in a juvenile detention home.

By 1960, 90 percent of high-school-age youngsters were attending school. From a relatively elite institution for the college-bound, the high school has been transformed within forty years into a mass detention home. The ideal teacher is no longer the college-entrance-exam-oriented pedagogue but the counselor type who can persuade the average youngster to adjust to this detention or the tough authoritarian who can force it down his or her throat. Since “winners” *and* “losers” are expected to stay in school until graduation, the high school diploma is no longer a sign of academic achievement but of the youngster’s seat-warming endurance over a twelve-year period. The success of the public school system itself is now measured in terms of its efficiency in persuading or compelling youth to extend their schooling indefinitely; if possible, not only through high school but on to junior college, with each higher institution acting as a remedial program for the lower.

Meanwhile, to sell the public on the new custodial role of the schools, the myths of education as the magic weapon to open all doors, particularly the door to higher earnings and unlimited consumption, and of the schools as the only place to get an education, have been propagated. Extended schooling has been made into an American obsession. As a number of observers have noted, faith in education has replaced faith in the church as the salvation of the masses. In the practice of this faith, education has become the nation’s second largest industry, expending upwards of \$50 billion a year. The professional educator has become the new religion’s practicing clergy, constituting the country’s largest occupational grouping. At the same time, in order to distract and placate the detainees and to create an outlet for the goods pouring off American assembly lines, the youth market has been created.

The Internal Contradiction Exposed

The internal contradiction between the traditional separator and the new mass custodial roles assigned to the schools was bound to lead to conflict and disintegration: and this, in fact, is what has been taking place over the past twenty years. The black revolt has only brought out into the open and given focus to the mushrooming tensions between elite and average students, and between students and teachers, which first manifested themselves on a city-wide scale in the New York City strike of predominantly white high school students in 1950. No one knows these tensions better than the school teachers and administrators,

white and black. But because they have a vested interest in the system, they have for the most part been willing to settle for higher (i.e., combat) pay and better working conditions, such as smaller classes and more preparation time. Teacher organizations to achieve these demands have to some extent met the economic or class needs of teachers as workers. But the more teachers have gained as workers the less they have felt inclined to expose the bankruptcy of the educational system and to make fundamental proposals for its reorganization. They have made the fatal mistake of confusing their role as a special kind of worker engaged in the process of developing human beings with the role of production workers engaged in the process of producing inanimate goods.

It has thus been left to the black community to expose the fundamental contradictions within the system.

The Black Revolt

Prior to the Second World War black youth had been concentrated in the South, not only separate and unequal but practically invisible, as well. With the war a whole generation came North to work in the plants. With rising expectations whetted by relatively stable employment, service in the armed forces, and the postwar nationalist movements in other parts of the world, black parents began to send their children to school in such numbers that black youth now constitute the major part of the school population in most of the big cities from which whites have fled. But the more black kids finished high school the more they discovered that extended education was not the magic key to upward mobility and higher earnings that it had been played up to be. On the job market they soon discovered that the same piece of paper that qualified white high-school graduates for white-collar jobs only qualified blacks to be tested (and found wanting) for these same jobs. Their teachers, parents, and preachers tried to placate them by explaining how even more education was now needed to qualify for the increasingly skilled jobs demanded by automation. But all around them black youth could see that the jobs that they were told required two or more years of college when occupied by blacks were actually being done by white high-school dropouts.

Accepting at face value the myths about education, black parents began to turn their attention to the schools, only to discover that instead of being places of learning, the schools had become baby-sitting institutions in which their children had been socially promoted year after year, regardless of achievement levels as determined by the schools' own tests.

When school administrators and teachers were challenged to explain this situation, they tried to explain away their own failure by shifting the blame to black children. Hence the theories of the "culturally deprived" and "culturally disadvantaged" child, which have been

masquerading as sociological theory since the 1950s. In effect, these educators were saying: "There is nothing wrong with the system; only the wrong children have shown up." Through these alibis the professionals not only hoped to divert the attack back to the black community; they also hoped to hustle more money for themselves in the form of compensatory, remedial, more effective school programs.

But the defense has boomeranged. Forced to defend themselves and their children against the thinly disguised racism of the theory of "cultural deprivation," black parents and the black community have counterattacked. They have exposed the racism of school personnel and school curriculum, the unceasing destruction by the schools of the self-concept of black children so necessary to learning, and the illegitimacy of a system administered by whites when the majority of students are now black. From early demands for integration, the movement jumped quickly to demands for black history, black teachers, black principals, and then, in 1966, with the rising tide of Black Power, to demands for control of schools by the black community, beginning with the struggle over Harlem I.S. 201 in December of that year.

Struggle for Control

During the next five to fifteen years the black community is going to be engaged in a continuing struggle for control of its schools. Sometimes the struggle will be in the headlines and on the picket lines, as in Ocean Hill-Brownsville in 1968. Sometimes it will be less dramatic. But the black community is now unalterably convinced that white control of black schools is destroying black children and can no longer be tolerated.

During the next five to fifteen years the black community will also be redefining education for *this* day, *this* age, and *this* country. The overwhelming majority of black students who are not succeeding in the present school system (estimated by New York teachers union President Albert Shanker at 85 percent) have in fact rejected a used, outmoded, useless school system.

Over the past ten years literally billions of dollars have been injected into the schools all over the country—even more than has gone into the moon race—in an attempt to make the system work. In New York City alone the school budget was raised 200 percent until it is now more than one billion dollars a year, or one-third of the entire city budget. The New York teacher-pupil ratio was lowered to an average of 1:17; \$70 million of Title I money was poured into the organization of two thousand innovative projects; experts from the twelve colleges in the area were endlessly consulted; money was spent like water; book publishers, project directors, educational consultants were enriched; teachers drew bigger salaries to compensate them for the nightmare of the school day. But the achievement level of black

children has continued to fall.

The black community cannot afford to be wasting time fighting for reforms that have already proved worthless. Every week, every month, every year that we waste means that more black children are being wasted. We must reject the racist myth that by keeping kids in school an extra day, an extra week, an extra month, we are giving them a chance to learn a little something or helping to keep them out of mischief. Not only are they not learning in the schools, but the schools in the black community today are little more than mass penal institutions, breeding the same kind of vice and crime that mass penal institutions breed, making the average child an easy prey for the most hardened elements. Day after day, year after year, the will and incentive to learn, which are essential to the continued progress and future development of any people, are being systematically destroyed in millions of black youth, perhaps the most vigorous and resourceful of those between the ages of ten and twenty.

Redefining Education

The key to the new system of education that is the objective of the black movement for community control of schools is contained in the position paper of the Five-State Organizing Committee that was formed at a conference at Harvard University in January 1968. At this conference the black educators and community representatives agreed that *“the function of education must be redefined to make it responsive and accountable to the community.”*

The schools today are in the black community but not of it. They are not responsive or accountable to it. If anything they are an enemy force, a Trojan Horse, within it. The teaching and administrative staff come from outside the community, bringing with them the missionary attitude that they are bearing culture to backward natives—when in fact, like missionaries, they are living off the natives. The subject matter of the schools, beginning with the information about the policeman and the fireman given to first and second graders, is alien to the lives of the children. And, *most important*, students succeed only to the degree that they set their sights toward upgrading themselves as *individuals out of the community*, so that the schools are in fact an organized instrument for a brain drain out of the community.

American education, like American society, is based upon the philosophy of *individualism*. According to this philosophy, the ambitious individual of average or above-average ability from the lower and middle classes is constantly encouraged to climb up the social ladder out of his social class and community. To achieve this goal, like the black Englishman in colonial Africa, he must conduct himself in ways that meet the approval and social standards of those in power, that is to say, as much *unlike* those in his community and as much *like* those

in the Establishment as possible. If he does this consistently to the satisfaction of those in power, who are always observing and grading his behavior, he is rewarded by promotion and advancement into the higher echelons of the system. This is what is known as “making it on your own.” The more opportunistic you are, the better your chance of “making it.”

In the school system this means relating to the teacher and not to your classmates. It means accepting what is taught you as the “objective” or “gospel” or “immaculately conceived” truth which stares at you out of the pages of the textbook. (The textbook itself, of course, is by its very weight and format, organized to convey the impression of permanence and the indubitability of Holy Scripture.) You then feed these truths back to the teacher (“the correct answer”), evading controversial questions that require thinking for yourself or taking a position. If you are willing to do this year after year, giving the “correct answers” on exam after exam, for as long as is necessary to satisfy the “guild” standards of the Establishment, you have it “made.” You have proved yourself a sheep as distinguished from the goats. Your parents are proud of you. You can buy a big car to show off before the neighbors, and you become eligible to share in the benefits of high-level corruption in its various forms.

The overwhelming majority of black youth see no relationship between this type of education and their daily lives in the community or the problems of today’s world that affect them so intimately. They see automation and cybernation wiping out the jobs for which they are supposedly being prepared—while such jobs as are still available to them are the leftovers that whites won’t take (including fighting on the front lines in a war). The book-learning so honored by their teachers and parents seems dull and static compared to what they see on television and experience on the streets. In their own short lives they have seen what passes as truth in books being transformed into lies or obsolescence by living history, and what passes as objectivity exposed as racist propaganda. Through television they have discovered that behind the words (which in books looked as if they had been immaculately conceived) are human beings, usually white, usually well-off, and usually pompous intellectuals. The result is that as the teacher stands up front bestowing textbook culture on them, they are usually carrying on a silent argument with the teacher—or else turning off their minds altogether.

Not having the drive to succeed in the world at all costs, which is characteristic of the ambitious opportunist, and much more sensitive to what is going on around them, they reject the perspective of interminable schooling without practice or application, which is now built into the educational system. Besieged on all sides by commercials urging them to consume without limit and conscious at the same time of the limitless productivity of American technology, they have abandoned the Protestant ethic of work and thrift. So they roam the streets, aimlessly and restlessly, everyone a potential victim of organized crime and a potential hustler against their own community.

Only One Side Is Right

There are two sides to every question but only one side is right, and in this case the students who have rejected the present system are the ones who are right, even if, understandably, they are unable as yet to propose concrete alternatives.

1. *The individualist, opportunist orientation of American education* has been ruinous to the American community, most obviously, of course, to the black community. In the classroom over the years it isolates children from one another, stifling their natural curiosity about one another as well as their potential for working together. (This process is what the education courses call “socialization.”) In the end it not only upgrades out of the community those individuals who might be its natural leaders, fragmenting and weakening precisely those communities that are in the greatest need of strengthening. It also creates the “used” community, which is to be successively inherited by those poorer or darker in color, and which is therefore doomed from the outset to increasing deterioration.
2. *Truth* is not something you get from books or jot down when the teacher holds forth. It has always been and is today more than ever something that is constantly being created through conflict in the social arena and continuing research and experimentation in the scientific arena.
3. *Learning*, especially in this age of rapid social and technical change, is not something you can make people do in their heads with the perspective that years from now, eventually, they will be able to use what they have stored up. By the time you are supposed to use it, it has really become “used.” The natural relationship between theory and practice has been turned upside down in the schools, in order to keep kids off the labor market. The natural way to learn is to be interested *first* and *then* to develop the skill to pursue your interest. As John Holt has written in *How Children Learn*, “The sensible way, the best way, is to start with something worth doing, and then, moved by a strong desire to do it, get whatever skills are needed.” A human being, young or old, is not a warehouse of information or skills, and an educational system that treats children like warehouses is not only depriving them of education but also crippling their natural capacity to learn. Particularly in a world of rapidly changing information and skills, learning how to learn is more important than learning specific skills and facts. A human being cannot develop only as a consumer. Depriving children of the opportunity to carry on productive activity is also depriving them of the opportunity to develop the instinct for workmanship, which has made it possible for humanity to advance through the ages. The experience of performance is necessary to learning. Only through doing things and evaluating what they have done can human beings learn the intrinsic relation between cause and effect, thereby developing the capacity to reason. If they are prevented from learning the intrinsic consequences of their own choices of ends and means and made

totally dependent on such extrinsic effects as rewards and punishments, they are being robbed of their right to develop into reasoning human beings.

4. Finally, you cannot deprive young people of the rights of social responsibility, and social consciousness, and the ability to judge social issues during the many years they are supposed to attend school and then expect them suddenly to be able to exercise these essential rights when they become adult.

Our children are not learning because the present system is depriving them of such natural stimuli to learning as exercising their resourcefulness to solve the real problems of their own communities; working together, rather than competitively, with younger children emulating older ones and older children teaching younger ones; experiencing the intrinsic consequences of their own actions; judging issues. It is because the present system *wastes* these natural human incentives to learning that its demands on the taxpayer are constantly escalating. It is because those who have succeeded under the present system have ended up as such dehumanized beings—technicians and mandarins who are ready to provide so-called objective skills and information to those in power—that students are in revolt on secondary and college campuses.

Toward a New System

We should now be in a better position to make more concrete the meaning of the proposal to “redefine the function of education in order to make it responsive and accountable to the community.”

Instead of schools serving to drain selected opportunists out of the community, they must be functionally reorganized to become centers of the community. This involves much, much more than the use of school facilities for community needs—although this should certainly be expanded. In order for the schools to become the center of the community, *the community itself with its needs and problems must become the curriculum of the schools.*³

More specifically, the educational program or curriculum should *not* consist of subjects like English or algebra or geography. Instead the school must be structured into groups of youngsters meeting in workshops and working as teams. These teams are then encouraged to (1) *identify* the needs or problems of the community; (2) to *choose* a certain need or problem as a focus of activity; (3) to *plan a program* for its solution; and (4) to *carry out the steps* involved in the plan.

In the course of carrying out such a curriculum, students naturally and normally, as a part of the actual process, acquire a number of skills. For example, they must be able to do *research* (observe, report, pinpoint—all related to the social and physical geography of the

community); set *goals* or objectives; *plot steps* toward the achievement of these goals; *carry out* these steps; *evaluate* or measure their progress toward their goals.

Through such a curriculum, research becomes a means of building the community rather than what it is at present, a means by which the Establishment prepares counterinsurgency or pacification programs against the community. Through the solution of real community problems, students discover the importance not only of *skills* and *information* but also of the *ideas* and *principles* that must guide them in setting and pursuing goals. In the *struggle* to transform their physical and social environment, they discover that their enemies are not only external but internal, within the community and within their own selves. Thus the weaknesses or needs of the community become assets in the learning process rather than the handicap or drawback that they are presently conceived to be.

With the community and, at times, the entire city as a learning laboratory, students are no longer confined to the classroom. The classroom is an adjunct to the community rather than the reverse. Students have an opportunity to exercise responsibility by identifying problems and by proposing and testing solutions, with the teachers acting as advisers, consultants, and instructors in specific skills. Students from various teenage groups can work in teams on the various projects, with each contributing according to his or her abilities at the various stages, younger students learning from older ones, and those with the capacity for leadership having an opportunity to exercise it.

One of the most important community needs, and one that naturally suggests learning activities, is the need for community information that can be met by student-produced newspapers, magazines, TV news and documentary programs, films, etc.

Education to Govern

No one should confuse this curriculum with a curriculum for vocational education—either in the old sense of preparing young blacks for menial tasks or in the up-to-date form in which Michigan Bell Telephone Company and Chrysler adopt high schools in the black community in order to channel black youth into low-level jobs. The only possible resemblance between these proposals and vocational education is the insistence on the opportunity for productive life-experiences as essential to the learning process. Otherwise what is proposed is the very opposite of vocational education. It is indeed education or preparation for the tasks of governing.

Concrete programs that prepare black youth to govern are the logical next step for rebellious black youth who, having reached the stage of Black Power in the sense of Black Pride, Black Consciousness, and total rejection of the present social system, are not sure

where to go. Young people whose *self-concept* has undergone a fundamental change must be given concrete opportunities to change their *actual* conditions of life. Otherwise, they can only exhaust and demoralize themselves in isolated acts of adventurism or in symbolic acts of defiance or escapism.

The fundamental principles underlying such programs are crucial to elementary as well as secondary school education. These principles are:

1. The more human beings experience in life and work, i.e., the more they have the opportunity to experience the intrinsic consequences of their own activity, the more able they are to learn and the more anxious they are to learn. Conversely, the more human beings, and particularly young people, are deprived of the opportunity to live and work and experience the consequences of their own activities, the more difficult it is for them to learn and the more they are turned off from learning.
2. The most important factor in learning is interest and motivation; and conversely the more you cut off motivation and interest, the harder it is to learn.

This principle is especially relevant to the question of reading. If you try to force children to read, you can turn them off from reading in the same way that generations of children have been turned off from music by compulsory music lessons. Actually reading is much less difficult than speaking, which kids learn pretty much on their own. Once the relation between letters and sounds is learned—a matter of only a few weeks the reading development of children depends almost entirely upon interest and self-motivation. Thus, almost every good reader is actually self-taught.

When young children are regimented in the average elementary school classroom on the false assumption that children of the same chronological age have the same attention span and learn at the same pace and rhythm, what happens is that the great majority stop learning altogether,⁴ *becoming either passive or defiant*. Few parents know that in the average classroom most children are paying attention only about ten minutes out of the three-hundred-minute school day. The rest of the time they are trying to get into trouble or stay out of trouble. The few children in a classroom who can adjust to the rhythms arbitrarily set by the teacher become the “bright ones,” while the others are categorized from very early as the “dumb ones.” The tracking system is not the product of a particular teacher’s biases; it is built into the system of forced learning. Parents particularly must begin to try to envisage a classroom reorganized to provide the opportunity for children to move about freely, choose among activities, learn what they are interested in learning, learn from each other and from their own mistakes.

Obviously the range of choice and area of activity cannot be as broad for younger children as it is for teenagers. But once we get rid of the stereotypes of wild children who must be

forced to learn, we will be able to think in terms of curriculum and structure for elementary schools. For example, classroom space could easily be subdivided into sections, each of which is associated not with specific children but rather with activities: a library and writing space where “reading and writing will be in the air,” a rest and privacy space, an arts and crafts space, a play space. Children would be able to move from one area to another as they choose. The teacher could remain fixed at times—available for consultation—or at others move about from space to space. Children of different ages, within a particular range, could learn from each other.

The Opposition

We must have no illusion that it will be easy to reorganize American education, and particularly education in the black community, along these lines. Vicious as well as subtle opposition will come from all those with a stake in the present system: teachers and administrators who have climbed up the social and economic ladder within the framework of the old system and who now think they have earned the right to make others undergo the same ordeal; the publishing industry, which is making such huge profits off the school system; city agencies like the Board of Health, the Board of Education, the Fire Department, the Police Department, the Sanitation Department; the building industries and the unions; the merchants and finance companies. Concerned only with their own vested interest in living off the black community, they can be expected to raise a hue and cry about “irresponsible youth taking over” and “child labor.”

Some very fundamental questions are posed here, questions that American society will have to face sooner rather than later, because it is obviously impossible to reorganize an educational system completely without reorganizing the social system it serves.

First of all, who are the irresponsible ones? The young people who will be trying to improve their communities? Or the institutions and agencies (supported by their parents’ taxes) who have been presiding over its deterioration? The issue here therefore is not young people but the same issue as that involved in the right of the black community to self-determination. Obviously what these opponents fear is not just youth but the threat to their continuing control, the exposure of their shortcomings, and programs that may end in their replacement.

On the question of “child labor,” it should be emphasized that what we are proposing is not “labor” at all. *Labor* is activity that is done for wages under the control of persons or organizations exploiting this labor for profit. What we are talking about is *work* that the young people choose to do for the purpose of improving the community and under their own direction.

However, the clash is unavoidable. Because labor has been the only means for survival and advancement in this society, and because increasing automation and cybernation have cut down jobs, any kind of productive activity has now become a privilege monopolized by adults and increasingly denied to youth. The whole process is now reaching the absurd proportions of older people doing jobs that could be more safely and easily done by youth, while youth are supposed to stay in school, expending their energies in play, postponing the responsibilities of work and adult life, on the promise that longer schooling will make them capable of better jobs. Meanwhile the skills they are acquiring become obsolete. The whole procedure is based on the false assumption that education is only for the young and that it must be completed before you start to work and live. Actually the time is coming when society will have to recognize that education must be a lifelong process for old and young. In the end a rational society will have to combine work and study for all ages and for people in every type of activity, from manual to intellectual.

Rallying to the support of all these vested interests we can expect the intellectuals, social scientists, and physical scientists, claiming that by such programs society will be drying up the supply of experts, intellectuals, scientists, etc. The charge is absurd. Such programs will increase the supply because they will stimulate the desire for learning in great numbers of youth who in the past were turned off from learning.

The Struggle

In the long and the short run, the opposition of all these vested interests can be overcome only if black parents and black students begin to see that this is the only kind of education that is relevant in this country at this stage, particularly for black people, and that unless we embark on a protracted struggle for this kind of education, our children will continue to be wasted.

That is why the struggle for community control of schools is so important.

The black community will have to struggle for community control of schools. It can struggle most effectively, that is to say, involve and commit the greatest number of people from the community, if it can propose concrete programs for reorganizing education to meet the real and urgent needs of the black community.

The organic, inherent, irreversible weakness of the present educational power structure is its complete inability to develop such programs because it has been organized and is structured only for the purposes of producing an elite and detaining the mass. Hence the strategic importance of fighting them on this front by developing concrete programs for curriculums that the black community can regard as its own and therefore insist that the

schools implement. The time is especially ripe for such proposals because mushrooming decentralization programs are of necessity contradictory and confusing, creating areas in which no one is quite sure who has decision-making power.

The Total Community

In the preceding I have concentrated on the needs of the black community because it is in the vanguard of the struggle for community control of schools and therefore more immediately faced with the question of how to redefine education. But this is not only a black question. During the next five to fifteen years, increasing numbers of white students are also going to turn their backs on the educational system, not only in college but in high school. At the present time the majority of white students still accept the system because their little pieces of paper are still a passport to jobs and college. But even if the white school front remains quiet, every concerned citizen should be asking: "Do we really want our children to end up, like Nixon's Great Silent Majority, ambitious only for their own financial advancement and security, apathetic except when confronted by blacks moving into their neighborhoods or competing for their jobs, afraid not only of blacks but of their own children and indeed of any fundamental social change to meet the needs of changing technology, acquiescing in the decisions of the Mayor Daleys, the Judge Hoffmans, the Spiro Agnews, and eventually the George Wallaces?"

These whites did not come from outer space any more than did the "good silent Germans" of Hitler's day. They are the products of the American educational system, which has been organized to fit the American Way of Life. It was in the public schools that Nixon's Great Silent Majority learned, through a systematized procedure, the values of materialism, individualism, opportunism, and docility in the presence of authority. It was in the schools that they were systematically indoctrinated with the myth that truth is what you read in books or hear from those in power, and with the ideology that this is not only the best of possible worlds but that it operates with the inevitability of natural law, making it futile to criticize or oppose its operations. ("What's the use? It's always been this way and it's always going to be this way.") It was in the schools that the seeds of their present fears and powerlessness to rebel against authority were systematically sown.

All these are the values against which today's youth, black and white, coming of age in a world of unprecedented technological and social revolution, are in revolt. Today's youth is determined to have power over its own conditions of life. But the public school system has failed to prepare today's Great Silent Majority to understand its own youth, let alone the need to transform itself to cope with the rapid changes taking place.

It therefore is the schools that must accept a share of the responsibility for creating the

contradiction that now threatens this country's destruction, the contradiction between being the technologically most advanced and the politically most undeveloped country in the world. They are also one of the weakest links in the system's chain of operations.

Before the present system of education was initiated some two generations ago, education was only for the *elite*, to prepare them to govern over their subjects. Then came *mass education*, to prepare the great majority for labor and to advance a few out of their ranks to join the elite in governing. This system is now falling apart as a result of its own internal contradictions, with the cost being borne at the present time by the black community. That is why it is so urgent that we develop a new system of education that will have as its means and its end the development of the great masses of people to *govern over themselves and to administer over things*.

Notes

1. ↪ Colin Green, "Public Schools: Myth of the Melting Pot," *Saturday Review*, November 15, 1969.
2. ↪ James Coleman, *Adolescents and the Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1965).
3. ↪ See Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Delacorte Press), 1969.
4. ↪ Black parents who send their children to Catholic schools on the basis that in that "law 'n' order" environment their kids at least learn their three R's should reflect on what this authoritarian environment may be doing to their children's real, i.e., creative, learning potential.