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We must cure our own ignorance before we can hope to cure that of others.

EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR IN A MIDWEST SCHOOL DISTRICT, 1954 TO 1974

Mary Ann Welch Bendezu

This qualitative study presented the experiences of students of color who studied in the public schools of a Midwest city between 1954 and 1974 and an examination of the policies and practices of the board of education members toward students of color: African American, Hispanic American, and Native American. Their own words provided insight as to the treatment of students of color at that time.

A definition of history came from two citizens in a critique of a school history text: "History . . . provides contemporaries with a view of their past . . . The history of a state, nation or world that omits the history of any of its people cannot be considered as complete" (Bullock & Simpson-Kirkland, n.d.).

The absence of records about people of color in the schools showed me an opportunity to study the history of a group of people whose personal accounts would soon be lost. Many of my students who are people of color claim that "nothing has changed," in regard to the treatment of people of color. For them, in their few years, not much has changed. In this study, I explored the experiences and opinions of people of color in [City] during their school years. In many ways, people of color are now treated very differently than in the past. In other ways, they feel the same kinds of oppression.

Archival data for this study were found in the public and private libraries of [City]. In addition, I interviewed 15 individuals: seven former students, one former board member, one community member, the mother and father of 11 former students, one former teacher, and two former school administrators. Eleven interviews were with people of color: the students, the community member, and the parents.

Banks (1995) wrote about the "historical reconstruction of knowledge about race: "Recognizing that knowledge contains both subjective and objective elements does not mean that we must abandon the quest for the construction of a knowledge that is as objective as possible" (p. 15).

The nature of this study was subjective: I reject the idea that people of any race are superior to another. I know as a teacher that it will be in the schools that our children will learn to get along with their peers or to fight them; where the racism in our country will turn into acceptance or will grow into hatred; and where all of us will either celebrate our similarities and differences or retreat into mutual distrust.

Research Questions

I asked participants these questions: (1) How were students of color treated in your school? (2) What events concerned students of color in the schools after 1954? (3) What happened to students of color in the schools from 1954 to 1974?

Findings

Coding and analysis of the data revealed four categories of comments by participants: (1) official school board policies; (2) traditional school board practices; and (3) policies of other entities affecting students of color.

I found two major themes: (1) the ignorance of European Americans about people belonging to other ethnic or racial groups and (2) the invisibility of people of color to European Americans.

Until the formation of a district multicultural advisory committee in 1972, [City] Public Schools board of education had no written policies about students of color that are now available. The comments of participants revealed that most students of color attended certain schools that were located in their "gerrymandered" attendance areas and that school officials were reluctant to recruit or hire people of color as teachers. The activities of other entities within the city also affected students of color: federal, state, and city government directives; banks; insurance companies; the police; the state university; and local churches.

The majority of comments by participants concerned the every day school life of these students while they studied at the [City] schools: their teachers, good and bad; classes; extracurricular activities; other students; and parents.

Good Teachers

Former students and their parents had a lot to say about educators. Every participant remembered at least one helpful educator. All but one student of color could also tell of at least one incident of racism, stereotyping, insensitivity, indifference, misunderstanding, or unkindness by one educator. Most people prefaced their comments about teachers by stating that they had received a good education in [City] Public Schools.

[Participant E] was a student at an elementary school where most students were people of color. She remembered a sixth grade class with a teacher who taught her to play chess. She felt that the classroom provided her the freedom to learn on her own. She said, "It was open classroom . . . I learned more that year than ever, because I got to do things I was interested in without being structured. And it helped."

Participants mentioned by name 22 teachers who had a positive interaction with them. One elementary teacher was admired by three participants. [Participant F] said, "She was just really wonderful. She encouraged us kids to read. That is why I wanted to go on with school." The two parents also spoke of this person as one of two good teachers in their sons' elementary school.

[Participant A] said of two teachers whom she admired: "They to me were the best people you could ever really encounter in junior high. She was very, very helpful in having students see their potential. He was always smiling." This

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same participant felt that her junior high school music teacher showed enthusiasm. She said, "He'd push us . . . because he wanted us to do our best."

[Participant G] spoke about a dean at [City] High School who helped him get a loan for college. He said, "I needed some money . . . and she gave me a good recommendation . . . Because of her, I got it." He also recalled an economics teacher who pushed him to do well on a project about the New York Stock Exchange. As a result of this teacher's influence, he majored in business in college. He appreciated the efforts of his home room teacher to encourage him to go to college and of another teacher who pushed him to write.

[Participant B] liked an English teacher who was "One of the few teachers who really went out of her way to encourage all minority students . . . She did not follow that old, 'Okay, these kids are here, and these kids are over here,' routine." She also thought that this teacher had handled correctly their study of the book *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1884). She said, "I remember her telling us up front that book had the word nigger in it, why the book had the word nigger in it, and that we were absolutely not to use that against other people or try to make anybody feel bad."

[Participant B] said that she was always put into the classes for rapid learners and encouraged to take college preparatory courses. She stated, "I was always treated very well because I had very high test scores." Her junior high school counselor told her to take the college preparatory track in high school, "forced" her to take a foreign language instead of clerical classes, and pushed her "in that direction." This participant later graduated from the state university.

The mother of former students said of her son's experience with a teacher in elementary school, "He had a reading disability . . . and [she] took her time after school to have [him] stay . . . so she could help him with his reading, on her own time." She said of her children's teachers in general, "Some of the teachers were excellent teachers. They had my children's interest at heart . . . If not, they wouldn't have learned."

Bad Teachers

Participants mentioned 14 educators who treated students of color in a negative way. The former board member remembered that a guidance counselor told her, "I knew this black girl. She told me she wanted to take a secretarial course when she went to high school. And I just told her, 'Do you find your kind of people working as secretaries in offices?' "

[Participant E] told of problems in a [City] High School history class. She answered a question about Columbus by saying, "Columbus landed in 1492. He didn't discover shit, because it was already there." She got sent to the principal's office for rudeness, was removed from the history class and put into a sewing class. She commented, "I just think they didn't know how to handle it."

[Participant F] recalled being called into his elementary school nurse's office to have his head checked for lice. He said, "I don't know if that was done for everybody, but I know for the Mexican kids in the neighborhood that seemed to be a routine thing." He added that in [City] High School the chorus in which he sang had performed a minstrel show and that, "It was the accepted thing to do."

Both he and three other participants remembered reading the book *Little Black Sambo* (Bannerman, 1928) in grade school. Even after 1964, when the book had been taken off the required reading list, teachers continued to teach with it. The two parents told about their African American son being chosen to play the part of Sambo in a sixth grade class play based on the book. When he told the teacher that his parents did not want him to take the role, the teacher recast him as Mumbo, another character in the book. His mother had to go to the school and tell the teacher that he was not going to take part in the play. The teacher responded to the parent's objection to the book by saying, "Well, this is the story, and all the children love that story." The parent said that this teacher then cast another African American child as Sambo. The parent agreed with the teacher that her own child did enjoy Little Black Sambo, but she also said that her son was an "innocent," who did not understand what she found negative about the book.

The two parents remembered that their children on many occasions were "called out of their name," a euphemism for the use of the racial insult "nigger." In one incident, the parents stated that the principal of the junior high school intervened and punished their son who reacted to the insult but did not punish the student who did the name-calling. The mother said: "And, then, [the principal] told [my son] that the name calling wasn't as bad as the licking he gave the boy . . . I didn't know about it until [my son] came home. But [the principal] called the white kid's father to come to the school.

In a second incident her son was insulted by a student and punished by a teacher for fighting. Both parents said the punishment of their sons by a teacher and a principal, when the sons were provoked to fight by racial epithets, should be called racism.

Guidance counselors were also criticized by some participants. The two parents of former students recalled that their eldest son had been placed by his counselor in nonacademic classes after commenting, "You're from a large family, and I know you won't be going to college." The mother said: "His counselor put him as hall guard and movie operator instead of the academic subjects that he really needed . . . Then he got a scholarship to Harvard University and got his master's degree." She stated that the counselor ignored her son's ability and discouraged him from wanting to prepare for college.

[Participant C] said, "I don't remember any guidance counselors at all." [Participant F] commented, "I had very little contact with guidance counselors." The only contact with a counselor that she remembered was after the death of her only parent. The counselor asked who would have custody of her. There was no other indication of concern.

[Participant B] told about one of her elementary teachers: "I had this teacher . . . She told [my friend] that I was the nicest little colored girl she'd ever known . . . In a lot of their eyes I was the exception . . . I was [not] fitting the normal pattern."

This person observed that many of her friends had experiences different from hers as a prospective college student. She said: "I watched a lot of my friends, who didn't have high test scores, who were not pushed . . . [They] were encouraged to go the vocational or clerical route . . . Only two of us were actually encouraged to take the college prep courses."

One student told about an incident in a high school physiology class. The teacher taught students to "do their own blood type," and told about sickle-cell anemia. The teacher pointed out that this blood disease was more common among people of African American descent than among other groups. He expressed eagerness to see this participant's blood smear, came "running over there" and said, "Maybe we'll get to see it." He apparently gave no thought to the fact that if his student had this blood cell, she was seriously ill. This participant felt that the teacher's remarks and actions had been unkind, insensitive, and stereotyping.

[Participant A] said that in a sixth grade science class, she worked a long time on a weather project 'etc. Her teacher's response was, "That's done so well, you couldn't have done it yourself." She attributed her teacher's refusal to credit her with good work to racism or stereotyping of "females or blacks."

[Participant A] taught for the first time at a [City] elementary school. She said this school was one where she and many students of color studied. Her teacher's assistant worked well with this teacher for two days but then quit the job because, as

office personnel told the teacher, "She felt that she couldn't work with a black person telling her what to do."

[Participant C] said, "It's not that I can think of any teachers who in some way tried to put me down. But, I know there weren't any who encouraged me." He thought that his teachers "just kind of let you go, without trying to push you." [Participant F] remembered having difficulty with mathematics classes in secondary school. She said, "I had weak math teachers . . . I didn't feel that I was given adequate instruction." She said of one junior high school teacher, "I would ask for help. She was too busy to help me. And, she would always help those that really didn't need it. So, I'd just barely slide by in algebra."

The father of former students said his sons experienced discrimination by high school sports coaches. He felt that two of his sons were excellent players who were not "selected to go play in the Shrine Bowl," because of the coaches' racism. He added that football players who were not liked by the coaches did not get good recommendations for University football play. He said, "If the coach [doesn't] agree with them, they don't recommend them for the university. They can play football, . . . but the attitude's against them." His sons got college football scholarships, in spite of their coaches' lack of recommendation.

The mother told about a baseball coach at [City] High School who was thought by her children and her children's friends to discriminate against African American students. She said, "One of the boys wouldn't go out for baseball because the coach was prejudiced . . . And, [my son] was very good at baseball." The parents remembered only one student of color who had gone out for the baseball team at this high school. A check of the [City] High School yearbook photographs of the baseball teams from 1954 to 1974 showed that the team did not have any players who appeared to be people of color until the 1970s (, 1954–1974).

The experiences recounted by the participants in the study showed that people of color perceived racism on the part of educators in the [City] Public Schools. Even though they also remembered good experiences with educators, they were aware of teachers' unjust actions toward students who were people of color and that those actions were not the same as those experienced by European American students.

Extracurricular Activities

Every former student and parent participant talked about extracurricular activities during their own or their children's public school experience.

African American students in 1951 reported participation in all but two extracurricular activities at [City] High School. The students who were interviewed in a study done three years before the first year of this study "felt that they were discriminated against because of race." They did not participate in the pep club and the annual student picnic. They did not attend the picnic because the day's activities were swimming, dancing, and skating, and they were not allowed to take part in these activities. City laws restricted swimming pools and other recreational facilities to whites (Collins, 1951). One of the parent participants also spoke of the prohibition against African Americans going to local [City] swimming pools during the 1940s and 1950s.

The former principal dealt with the issue of racism in the girls' pep club "in the early fifties." The school pep club for senior girls selected new members by vote every year. He said, "There had never been any black girls in the pep club," and, "The friends of girls who were already in were usually the ones that got in." African American females were excluded from the pep club. The principal changed the membership rules so that, "Any senior girl would be subject to the same eligibility rules that we had for all students in athletics, which meant that, if they were a student in good standing, with a good citizenship record, they could be members of the pep club." Some parents of African American students told him, "It was one of the best things that we had done for black girls." The principal's comments were supported by the appearance in the yearbook pep club photographs of women students of color during all but one of the years of the study (*Links, 1954–1974*).

The seniors who were people of color in the [City] High School for 1954–1974 were pictured in the annual yearbooks with their activities and awards. For the twenty years of the study, there was a total of 459 seniors who were people of color. These seniors listed 1,479 different extracurricular activities and awards: in sports activities; in music and drama; and in leadership, career and service organizations. A total of 34 students of color were chosen as "royalty" at social events in [City] High School, all but two of them after 1967. Awards for academic achievement or community service were given to 27 students of color between 1954 and 1974 at [City] High School 1954–1974).

Students of color participated in those extracurricular activities to which they were allowed admittance. The example of the pep club showed how the leadership shown by one educator brought about change for students of color. These changes happened over a period of years, but most of the increase in student of color participation in extracurricular activities happened after 1968.

Friendships

Five former students in [City] Public Schools spoke of friendships with students from different racial or ethnic groups. [Participant A] said, "We've all kind of associated together in our schools while growing up. So, this was pretty much natural to us. We didn't understand the flap when the dating part of it came." [Participant D] commented "There was interracial dating. I had friends that . . . called at the house all the time. As far as I know, nobody was putting anybody down for it."

[Participant C] told about a Mexican American student who dated a European American girl whose parents did not want her to date a Mexican American. His best friend picked her up for dates. [Participant A] stated that most of the interracial dating was black males with white females. She added that most of the objections to this dating came from adults at school and parents. [Participants D and E] said that some African American females in [City] High School did not approve of interracial dating and once physically attacked black men who dated white women.

An African American student objected to his black friends' hypocrisy in a letter to the school newspaper in 1972: "It was good to see all the so-called Black brothers say, we want a Black this and a Black that . . . But then they leave [the meeting] with a white girl" (So-called, *Advocate*, Feb. 16).

Name Calling

[Participants A, B, C, E, and F], and the two parents reported that students of color were called insulting names by other students in the schools. [Participant B] told of name-calling at [City] High School. An administrator put the students in a room together and told them, "All right, now you're in here together. We're not going to let you kill each other, but we want you to deal with the problem."

The mother of former students said that her children were "always" insulted by other students with name-calling and racial slurs on the playground and walking home from school. In one incident, her son told the other child, "You know that isn't my name." The other child replied, "Yes, it is, because all of you are . . . He used the 'N' word." She also remembered that one of her sons had fought with another boy nearly "every day," for name-calling. When both were in sixth grade, the two

became good friends when his adversary told her son that he would never again call him a name. This parent thought that the name-calling diminished through the years because of the parents' teaching. She said, "You learned it at home. You didn't learn it at school."

[Participant C] also remembered name-calling. He said, "It did happen . . . you know, the exchange of words . . . name calling." He then recited a list of four racial slurs that were used against him by other students: "greaser," "wet back," "spick," and "wop." He added, "I do know that there were always little fights among kids because of name-calling, which was based on race, ethnicity."

[Participant B] said of [City] High School: "There was some racial tension. The comment was made to the black students, why did we all sit together at lunch? . . . It was real hard to get people to understand that you wanted to sit with your friends." She commented that, "When white kids all sit down together, like the football team or the cheerleaders, nobody thinks anything about it, because they're just friends. But, as soon as we do it, it's like were segregating ourselves."

Participants remembered that students of color were insulted with racial epithets by fellow students. No participants reported racial name calling by teachers. The two parents did recall tolerance of name calling by principals and teachers. The parents stated that the educators blamed the insulted students for their fighting with other students who did the name calling.

Parents

According to all participants, parents played a role in the experiences of students of color in the [City] Public Schools. Participants mentioned their parents' efforts to protect them from racism at school; to guide them in coping with hostility from people in the school; to give them pride about their identity as people of color; to take advantage of the educational opportunities offered; to educate them about the history and traditions of their cultural group; and to deal with school officials for them.

Participants mentioned help with school work. [Participant F] said: "My mother didn't speak much English, so she didn't feel comfortable coming to the school and speaking to any of my teachers. I do know that when I took Spanish, she was very helpful there." She was the youngest of seven siblings, all of whom later finished college after study at [City] High School.

The two parents of 11 children recalled helping their children with classes. They emphasized the fact that the father always worked two jobs so the mother could stay at home. They attributed their children's success to their own resolve to have the mother at home and to careful oversight of the children's progress in school. Their father commented, "I think if you got more of that now, you wouldn't have so much trouble with kids in jail." They drove one of their sons to a teacher's home to be tutored in reading every Saturday. They thought that the price of the tutoring was expensive, but well worth the cost. She said, "We tried to give our children every opportunity there was."

[Participant B] talked about a family friend, a person of color, who "expected a lot of his kids." She added, "That's what I got from most of the black people. They had very high expectations of their kids."

The parents of [Participant A] always told her, "Do what you're supposed to do, and you come home and study. Get your work turned in and do it." She added, laughing, "And that's pretty much the way I did things."

Besides helping children with school work, many parents worked directly with educators. The former principal of [City] High School remembered approval from African American parents for his democratization of the pep club and the speech given by the mother of an African American student at a school athletic banquet. He said, "I felt that we had good support from black parents in our efforts to be sure that there was equality of learning and treatment."

[Participant A] had attended an elementary school in the neighborhood of the [African American] Community Center and spoke of the Parent Teacher Organization for that school. She said: "[It] was pretty integrated. My parents and a lot of the parents in the neighborhood served on the PTO as officers, and the relationships that they built with the majority population, the white families, were good, too, because some of those relationships still exist."

She also said that when she had a problem with a teacher, her parents, because of their participation in the Parent Teacher Organization, felt comfortable in going to the school to speak with the teacher and to let her know that their child had done her own work on a science project. The teacher apologized to her parents but never to the student herself.

The mother of former students refused to allow her son to play the part of Little Black Sambo in the school play, then was forced to visit with her son's teacher to prohibit his recasting as Little Black Mumbo and to object to the use of this book in the class. She had also gone to her sons' junior and senior high schools to object to her sons' punishments by educators for fighting after they were insulted with racial epithets.

Parents also taught children how to achieve success in a white world. [Participant B] said, "[It's] a real hard thing to get someone who hasn't lived through it to understand . . . the message that was given to me by my grandmother, that you're always going to have to work harder."

[Participant A] told about her parents' view of education. "My parents instilled in us the importance of education . . . We were going to school to learn what was being taught . . . It was our place to learn and get the best education that we could." She emphasized this idea when she added that her parents told her, "As you get your education, you're going to have to do better, do more, than the white students in class. Because people will think that you don't know how to do things . . . You'll have to show them."

[Participant C] at first said that his parents had not played an important role in his education. He said, "Our parents were not aware of what we were up to. We had no real support at the house. The [Hispanic] community was certainly not active in school issues. In fact, probably most of the community were new immigrants." However, at another point during our interview, he recalled his parents' advice to be "clean" and "well behaved" at school, because if he were not, white people would see him as a "dirty little Mexican kid," rather than just a "dirty little kid." His mother did not know how to read and write "in any language," and his father had studied "two or three years of school." However, his parents did give their children the "work ethic." In this sense, his parents were giving him the same kind of instruction as other participants' parents about how to behave in school and to get along by trying harder than white children, studying more, working to the best of one's ability, to be and do better than others.

[Participant G] criticized African Americans who did not take advantage of financial aid for students of color during the late 1960s and the 19170s. He blamed this on the lack of education of most students' parents. He said, "You could get free grants back then. I'm sorry to say . . . most black people [did not] take advantage of them . . . Our parents weren't educated people . . . It wasn't like you had a role model [who could say] 'Sign up!' " This same man took advice from another family member who encouraged him to attend college instead of joining the army after graduating from high school.

From the above account, it was possible to hear from parents of former students, and educators the special kinds of advice, instruction, and help that people of color felt were necessary to prepare their students for adult life, as well as strate-

gies that they knew had to be learned by people of color in addition to those universal to parenting and growing.

Strategies

All former students talked about methods they used to get along with others or to maintain their pride. [Participant B] said, " We [African Americans] were clean. We were sharp, because we might not have had anything else, but we had nice clothes . . . We took pride in that." Two people remembered changes they made to their hair, in order to make it more attractive and to show pride in their racial group. [Participant G] mentioned that, "We all eventually went to the natural and the 'Fro . . . They quit putting the chemicals in and went natural. Natural wasn't bad." [Participant B] told me, "For years, I used to get my hair permed, too . . . Finally, I just said, This is the hair that I was born with, and why should I be fighting it?"

Students said they learned as children that they would have to work harder at success than European Americans. [Participant C] talked about his family's maxims for dealing with racism: "It was taught that you had to be cleaner than other kids. Your behavior had to be better than other kids. And so, we were raised with that . . . They just prepared you for what could possibly happen on the streets." [Participant A] said, "I learned from my folks: you learn; don't cause any problems; do what you're supposed to do." Parents told [Participant E], "As you get your education, you're going to have to do better, do more, than the white students in class." [Participant B] recalled her grandmother's message that "You're always going to have to work harder . . . I didn't whine about it. It was just given."

Two former students remembered feeling uncomfortable at school because the customs of their school mates were different from their own. [Participant C] did not know "how to eat with the utensils given" and found school food to be very different from that to which he was accustomed. He said, "I think you were always aware that you were a minority, because we were raised differently, in regards, especially, to the kinds of foods that we ate." The family of [Participant F] was poor, and she felt different from other students because of their economic status. She said, "I came from a poor family. I guess I felt bad."

Former students talked about groups to which they could turn for support. [Participant E] belonged to a group of young women who met at the [African American] Community Center to talk about the problems they encountered because of their race. They called their group "Silk and Soul." This woman said, "It really helped." [Participant G] listened to a "black radio station" in another city that was "good at educating you about black history." [Participant A] said, "When we got together as a group it was kind of a time to blow off steam."

Conclusions

The two themes of ignorance and invisibility were supported by the archival evidence, the interviews, and literature from the years of the study. These themes continue to be pertinent to education today.

Ignorance

Myrdal (1942) in his landmark study of race relations in the United States said that "the whole issue is enveloped in opportune ignorance and unconcernedness on the part of whites" (p. 383). He thus equated ignorance with lack of concern.

Participants who were people of color called the racist actions of some white people "ignorance." I asked the community member if ignorance could also be called "malice" or "evil." Her response was well thought out: "I think the malice is based on ignorance. In other words, I see it as a reaction to ignorance." She later said, "I've heard such ridiculous things as, 'Black people want integrated schooling so a black child could sit next to a white child.' How stupid can you get?" Her comments about the progress of multicultural education in the [City] Public Schools were no less devastating. She also said, "It makes no sense to me that educators should be so ignorant, and maintain that ignorance."

Other participants spoke of white people's ignorance. [Participant E] said of a history class, "Knowing what they were teaching these kids . . . How could they believe this stuff?" [Participant C] described European Americans' attitudes by saying, "As long as I don't know, I can make an excuse for my ignorance." The former board member commented, "There were a lot of clueless people in the district."

The ignorance about people of color was underscored by the lack of data about the dropout rate of students of color. The rate of graduation of these students was considerably lower on average than that of the total student population, according to numbers deciphered from [City] High School yearbooks. There was no evidence of concern on the part of the school officials during the years of the study, 1954 to 1974 *Links; Advocate*).

John Howard Griffin wrote about white ignorance in *Black Like Me* (1960). He said that "the word 'nigger'—leaps out with electric clarity . . . And always it casts the person using it into a category of brute ignorance." Griffin (1960) pointed out that once he had darkened his skin color acquaintances and friends did not recognize him at all. In fact, he did not recognize himself in the mirror. He became invisible to them because of his apparent race.

Invisibility

The second theme supported by the data was invisibility. The man who said that Hispanics were an "Invisible people" pointed out a truth that European Americans pretended for many years that people of color did not exist as a vital part of the community. The community member commented about the schools, "Well, I think it was the norm to ignore everything about students who were not white." The student who felt that she was all alone in her own civil rights movement said, "I didn't have anybody else backing me." Her feelings of not being acknowledged were much the same as those of a student of color who had to ask to participate in the talent show.

[Participant E] recalled the names of six Native American people who had studied with her at [City] Junior High School. All six had dropped out of school at the end of ninth grade. She spoke of them as "lost."

[Participant B] said of experiences during her years as a student at [City] High School: "A few of us are allowed to rise to a certain level, but, basically, we're not taken into consideration. We're not causing any problems, and so we're just kind of there, and they just ignore us." Finally, the community member expressed this idea of invisibility when she asked the school district social studies consultant, "Would you please tell me where I am in this [history text] book?"

Ralph Ellison (1984) explored the fact that "Americans can be notoriously selective in the exercise of historical memory and wrote about the absence of African American history in textbooks which the writers of the dominant culture have chose[n] to ignore" (p. 124).

The lack of school records about students of color, policies and board minutes pointed to a lack of interest on the part of school board officials. These lacks certainly supported Myrdal's (1942) idea of "opportune ignorance" and facilitated it. Most of the students of color in the city attended [City] High School from 1954 to 1974; but their presence was barely acknowledged by the school newspaper. [City] school yearbooks did not feature a celebration of African American culture until 1973 (*Advocate*, 1954–1974).

Additionally, most of the schools in the city did not enroll many students of color. Participants agreed that certain schools were attended by most students of color. Therefore,

students of color were not a concern for the all-white schools at all. They were physically invisible, because they were absent, not just invisible out of a refusal to accept them.

The policies of the members of the board of education, such as attendance boundaries and school construction, kept students of color in certain schools of the district. The board's curriculum policies ignored the presence of people of color in history and literature. Hiring policies did not take into account teachers who were people of color or the students they might serve. The members of the board resisted efforts by concerned members of the community to change the schools' policies to reflect the presence of people of color in the schools. Members of the board, the superintendent, and some administrators did not lead the community in its recognition of people of color; rather, they merely reacted to insistent, long-term demands by concerned citizens.

Implications

The problems produced for people of color by the ignorance of white people and their unwillingness to examine the points of view of people of color are still a part of the educational establishment. Delpit (1995) pointed out in *Other People's Children* that professors from university teachers colleges ignored the learning styles of people of color as they proposed new programs for the teaching of reading. She also told about her experiences in schools where the white, European American viewpoint was the only acceptable one, where the professional opinions of teachers who were people of color were ignored, where students of color were relegated to ignorance because of their bewilderment by and rejection of the dominant group's insistence that they conform to their expectations. She quoted bitter statements by former student teachers and beginning teachers who had left the profession because they felt ignored and pushed aside by the narrow vision of correct teaching methods they heard from their white colleagues and professors of education.

The problem that white people have in their ignorance about people of color—their cultures, their aspirations, their beliefs—is reflected in the stereotypes that the people of the majority groups offer about people of color (Ellison, 1984; Hughes, 1970; Delpit, 1995). As these authors, and many others, have pointed out, the answer to this ignorance is education. Hughes wrote in 1970: "If Camus is right and evil filters into the world through the pores of human ignorance, then racism, with the dreadful and unnecessary suffering it causes individual black children and adults, is curable by ample doses of knowledge and understanding" (p. vi).

Americans of all races agree about the importance of education for success and happiness in this country. If we did not give education such importance, there would be much less controversy about it. As educators, we will soon join in our classrooms with colleagues and students from many racial and ethnic groups different from our own. No matter what our own ethnicity or race, large numbers of our students will not belong to that particular group. We must cure our own ignorance before we can hope to cure that of others.

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