

## **Excellence or Heroism? Reflections on Urban Education**

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As William Hullihan has so eloquently stated, successful administrators and teachers in inner city public schools deserve our highest accolades. Toiling under difficult conditions, they achieve results that are truly remarkable. Yet their work often goes unnoticed while private, suburban public, and parochial schools are regularly cited as exemplary. Hullihan contends that the educators in these latter schools owe their success less to their own efforts than to supportive parents and neighborhoods.

Hullihan restricts the term *excellence* to inner city schools whose success cannot not be attributed to the exogenous variables of parental and neighborhood influence. Does he go too far? Surely there are excellent private, parochial, and nonurban public schools whose successes cannot be reduced to parental and neighborhood support. Although parents can make a school practically fail-proof by setting high expectations for their children and their teachers, by monitoring their children's progress, by enforcing behavioral standards, and by teaching and tutoring, administrators and teachers can obviously make an independent contribution. Just as there are better and worse teachers in any given school, so too research (e.g., Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979) indicates that there are better and worse schools in the same or similar neighborhoods.

Educational excellence, in my view, is attained whenever students develop intellectually and socially through interacting with each other and their teachers in a positive school environment. The fact that parents and neighborhood institutions can have a positive or negative influence on the educational process should not take away from the importance of the

process itself. Furthermore, my reading of the literature suggests that there are not two methods of teaching and discipline, one for advantaged and the other for disadvantaged children, but one method for all. For example, the teaching strategies recommended for gifted and talented programs seem to work for at-risk programs as well. Schools in advantaged situations can help us to identify successful teaching strategies simply because the teaching task is so much less complicated when students are motivated and secure and when teachers have adequate resources.

To fail to acknowledge that excellence may require the resources that wealthy suburban and private schools take for granted plays into the hands of opponents of increased funding for public education. Ignoring the "savage inequalities," so vividly portrayed by Jonathan Kozol (1991), they oppose proposals to increase funding for urban schools. In their view, improving the schools is a matter of will, not resources: Teachers and administrators simply need to set higher standards and enforce them and students need to say "no" to drugs and sex and "yes" to hard work and discipline.

Money, of course, does not guarantee excellence. For example, little will be gained by reducing class size if teachers are not skilled in leading discussions and supervising individual and group activities. On the other hand, teachers cannot be expected to succeed when schools are lacking in adequate books, laboratory equipment, and classroom space; nor can they be expected to succeed without compensatory social structures that deal with the problems created by family and neighborhood dysfunction.

An example of such compensatory social structures may be found in the Y.E.S. (Your Educational Success) Program for at-risk urban high school students in South Bend, Indiana.<sup>1</sup> The student-teacher ratio in the Y.E.S. Program does not exceed 10:1 to allow for individual and small group instruction. The teachers are freed from classroom responsibilities in the afternoon in order to contact parents, advise students, and plan; in the evenings, the teachers regularly contact parents and students and offer a parenting course. The teachers provide remedial instruction on Friday mornings. A sense of community is built through daily family group

meetings involving one teacher and a small group of students and weekly democratic community meetings involving all students and teachers (Power & Power, 1992). Needless to say, an at-risk program such as this, although it receives substantial financial support, still demands incredible faculty time and energy.

When teachers and administrators manage to overcome daunting obstacles through their extraordinary intelligence, effort, and charisma, their achievement deserves to be called heroic and not merely excellent. Their virtue is in some sense superhuman, their talents, energy, and commitment go beyond what can reasonably be expected of a good educator. Yet while we can reasonably ask excellence of all of our teachers and administrators, we cannot ask heroism. Although we will never be able to thrust heroic greatness on urban educators, with adequate funding excellence may at least become a realistic aspiration.

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<sup>1</sup>I wish to thank the Y.E.S. Program teachers, Joseph B. Good, Norma Kronewitter, and John Nagy, for allowing me to work with and learn from them.

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## **Excellence Will Not Happen in Isolation**

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Educational excellence is not a given in public or private schools. Private schools, as Dr. Hullihan has demonstrated, have the advantage of serving a prepared group of students. This could also be a disadvantage if education is to prepare children for participation in society. This disadvantage is minor compared to the problems faced by children who attend the "difficult schools" described by Hullihan. Only through massive social change will all our children be granted the opportunity for quality education. This is not a problem that can be repaired by another educational program.

If we agree with Hullihan's premise that the only excellent schools in America are a few inner city public schools, we must question why they are the exception rather than the rule. Why don't the many people interested in educational reform see that such schools are replicated for the benefit of all students? The answer lies not in the educational system but in the social structure in which it resides.

While private and suburban public schools possess the extraordinary advantages cited by Hullihan, they also possess different challenges for the educator. Success is guaranteed, but this success has its price. An assistant principal, recently transferred from a suburban to an inner city public elementary school in our district, told me she was delighted with her change in duties. She now has the opportunity to freely apply 20 years of training and experience to those who need it. She has the chance to structure a learning environment to meet children's needs, not the parents' needs. In her former position in the suburbs she spent 90% of her time

dealing with parental concerns. Now she deals with children. These children bring with them sometimes overwhelming, but always challenging, deficits in environmental stimulation from their backgrounds, creating a challenge with extraordinary rewards as the child responds to the educator. Such rewards energize some educators. The exceptional inner city school has such energy as its foundation.

But how long can such energy last? How long can educators remain vital in a depressed environment? The constant challenges can wear out even the most enthusiastic educator. After spending several years at inner city schools, teachers find their expectations become lowered. Children come to school tired and hungry. It is a common experience to see a child depressed, because Mom sold everything for a revived crack habit. The weeks before Christmas are especially hard for these youngsters. The anger often boils over at school as agency workers bring the only gifts these children will receive. There are no parents responding to invitations to see their children performing in school plays. The only volunteers at the school are community people, not parents. The most excellent school in America cannot fight against these external forces for very long.

I am a school board member for one of the largest, most diverse districts in the nation, serving some of the richest and some of the poorest children in the world: I have certainly experienced pressures from differing socioeconomic groups. Developers want new schools built near their developments. Suburban dwellers want their schools improved. Inner city parents cry for equity. The challenge of offering an equal educational opportunity to those who come to school unequally equipped is phenomenal. This challenge is coupled with political pressure to give more to those who have. A system must be developed which gives each child a chance to develop to his or her full potential in a safe environment. Our society cannot afford to waste lives.

Dr. Hullahan says, "Just how excellent inner city schools appear and initially sustain themselves involves stories unique to each. But such schools must become the norm in our cities, and quickly" (p. 337). This is not possible without social change. We cannot transplant programs from

one school to another and expect them to work for very long. Even the few unique, excellent exceptions won't last. The external environment will soon push educators to their limits and they too will be overwhelmed by the burnout common in our inner city schools.

Without societal change, we will lose these children. As long as they are isolated in our ghettos there can only be bandaids thrown down to them; the growing wounds can't be covered. If they are allowed to be truly educated for participation in society, they must be allowed to share the wealth of opportunity that others are given.

Perhaps the solution to the problem lies in some degree of socioeconomic integration. For instance, it has been suggested that the poor be given vouchers to attend private schools. Likewise, as absurd as it may appear at first glance, perhaps the wealthy should be given tax incentives to send their children to public schools. Creative approaches must be used to bring our children together.

We have learned through the failure of forced busing for racial integration that people must *want* to make change. Educational programs to encourage change don't do the job. For example, some are encouraging the growth of magnet programs to save the inner city schools. This busing by choice has encouraging possibilities but can create a situation in which the children without support are pushed out of their neighborhood schools. The selection process of these choice schools is similar to the private school selection mode. If they are allowed in, they are often segregated within the school program. The schools are saved; the lost children remain lost.

Communities must be motivated to work together for all our children. A county plan similar to our county's plan for racial integration might work for socioeconomic integration. Many of our suburban and inner city neighborhoods have signed agreements to attempt to racially integrate the population in their vicinity. For example, upper middle class suburban neighborhoods are marketing affordable housing to minorities, while inner city neighborhoods are attempting to attract middle class whites. This is

being done to ensure that their children can attend their local school and not be bused across town. Such a creative plan might be used to create socioeconomic desegregation which would impact the schools.

It would then be the obligation of educational leaders at the school center to create an atmosphere in which students could learn from each other. Many schools achieve numerical integration only to become housing for a divided student population. Segregation within the school can be as detrimental as the isolation within the community.

One of our neighborhoods has successfully integrated their community. I recently attended a program at this school. The event was comparable to the event described by Hullihan. Three generations of my family attended a school exhibition to see our son perform. The differences in the two programs are notable.

This was a public, integrated school. There was a handful of parents in attendance, not a full house. Those of us in attendance paid close attention to every word, song, and action in the presentation. Most of the children had not had private lessons in music and most of them were on stage for the first time. All of them were enrolled in a Special Education program unavailable in private schools. The program serves children with mental, physical, and emotional handicaps and is within a school that has regular education programs.

The program I attended was a delight. The few parents who attended the first performance were invited to stay for a second performance which included the entire student body. The morning's event was filled with excitement. My little boy was so thrilled about being on stage that I had to get him a change of pants between performances. During the second presentation the cafeteria was filled with children enjoying the show and displaying respect and admiration for the proud performers.

As the young people applauded their unique fellow students and then joined in singing the school song, I recognized what the teachers and administrators at this school had accomplished. The goal of education is

to prepare our children to participate in society. Through exposure to each other, all the children had a chance to be educated and prepared to take part in society in a way that no private school affords.