

Equity in the Educational Environment

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Abstract

One of the major responsibilities of any national government that seeks the well-being of all the people in the nation is ensuring that all groups of people receive the education that will help them become gainfully employed. It should not matter whether the groups of people are defined along racial lines or ethnic lines, by denomination or by gender. Through education, the government assists the citizens to raise their standard of living. This creates the sense of accomplishment that generates a high level of confidence in the people, making them see themselves as contributing members of the society.

The government has the responsibility of demonstrating to the citizens that it is supportive of their aspirations. One way of doing this is by providing an educational system that will prepare the students well for a future in which they can anticipate experiences that will enhance their being. The government can use this mode to show fairness in the distribution of the nation's resources, and thus gain the confidence and trust of the people in their leadership.

When defining equity in education, it should not be taken only in terms of numbers of specific groups within the society. It should also be considered on the basis of quality of education for all. Equity in education can help minimize and perhaps eliminate the tensions and biases that easily occur in any diverse society.

Introduction

The value of education has always been appreciated by all generations. Those who have controlled the educational infrastructure have always played a dominant role in their society. It has been used to enhance a people's character and belief in themselves by instilling proper values in the youth to create in them the ability for high expectations of themselves. It has also been used to control people by instilling the types of values that will give them inferiority complex and make them feel incapable of achieving anything useful. Any ideas that are implanted in the minds of the youth form a basis for their character through the rest of their lives. Education can be used selectively to distort one's view of reality.

In the US for generations past, people of African descent were denied the type of education that would enhance their character. Rather, the idea of unworthiness was implanted in the majority of the people. This was a deliberate act by those in control in the process of suppressing them. As stated by Stanley Fish¹ “But blacks have not simply been treated unfairly; they have been subjected first to decades of slavery, and then to decades of second-class citizenship, wide spread legalized discrimination, economic persecution, educational deprivation, and cultural stigmatization”. Considering the fact that a people’s future depends on the education of its youth, this denial translated to denying African Americans a future characterized by noble achievements as a people. It was designed to ensure a position of continual servitude for the African American. A fact that cannot be emphasized enough is that this negative treatment was perpetrated over decades. In spite of this negativity, some have achieved superlatively through their personal desire to excel.

The effect of implanting negative ideas in the minds of African Americans is observed today in many forms. The way Cornell West² views it, “The fundamental crisis in black America is twofold: too much poverty and too little self-love. The urgent problem of black poverty is primarily due to the distribution of wealth, power, and income—a distribution influenced by the racial caste system that denied opportunities to most ‘qualified’ black people until two decades ago.” One way the effect is observed is the low numbers of young African Americans in schools, colleges and universities and an even lower number of graduates³ from these educational institutions. Another is the low level of interest observed in some of the students and hence the drop-out rate among young African Americans. These effects can be traced back to generations in the past when people of African descent were forced to work on farms in plantations with little or no education, and being told they were incapable of learning. The idea has been implanted that the African American is good only in sports and entertainment, which through the centuries has proved to be totally wrong. This has been going on for generations, and has created a feeling of inadequacy that has no basis in fact, where academic achievement is concerned.

Information Utilization

Some of the objectives of the education process are to

- provide the student with the basic skills to prepare him/her to enter a profession of one’s choice
- develop the thinking process of the student in preparing one for dealing with different life situations
- develop in the student the mental attitude that prepares one in taking on new challenges.

The acquisition and utilization of information gathered through the education process is key to the progress one makes in life. It is therefore essential for one to have the tools necessary to acquire information. Two of the present day tools that are opening up the world to all who seek information are the personal computer and the Internet. Without a

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personal computer (or a computer of any sort, for example laptop computer) one cannot access the Internet.

The government appreciates the importance of the Internet in association with the technological development of the information age and the relationship of this to education. In *Introduction to Telecommunications, Voice, Data and the Internet*⁴, Marion Cole states “An educational fund was also provided to fund Internet services to schools and libraries. This fund is known as the E-rate fund.” This source goes on to state that Republicans refer to the E-rate “... as the *Gore tax* simply because, as vice-president, Al Gore was the main politician pushing to make the Internet an information superhighway. Democrats and Republicans continue to fight over this program. It has been made political in part because members of Congress do not want to be viewed as denying Internet access to underprivileged children.” In discussing arguments between the supporters for, and the opponents of the E-rate funding, the author comments “Rich people in our society can afford to provide their children with Internet access. Why should the rich want to deprive disadvantaged children of one of the tools that will help them better their lives?”

In the executive summary of *Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide*⁵, a document prepared by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) of the U.S. Department of Commerce, the need for all Americans to have access to the Internet is highlighted by the statement “The Clinton Administration is committed to connecting all Americans to the National Information Infrastructure.” The NTIA notes that more Americans have access to telephones, computers, and the Internet. “At the same time, however, NTIA has found that there is still a significant “digital divide” separating American information “haves” and “have nots”. Indeed, in many instances the digital divide has *widened* in the last year.” This report relies on December 1998 U.S. Department of Commerce Census Bureau data.

In reporting the disparities found, the NTIA report states “Whites are more likely to have access to the Internet from home than Blacks or Hispanics have from *any* location.” In discussing the *widening* of the digital divide between the “haves” and “have nots”, the document states “The digital divides based on education and income level have also increased in the last year alone. Between 1997 and 1998, the divide between those at the highest and lowest education levels increased 25 percent, and the divide between those at the highest and lowest income levels grew 29 percent”. As stated in the executive summary of the NTIA document, “Information tools, such as the personal computer and the Internet, are increasingly critical to economic success and personal advancement.” This paints a bleak picture for the “have nots”, the under privileged as regards economic success and personal advancement.

Cornell West pointed out in discussing the crisis in black America that too much poverty is one of the problems. This fact is emphasized by another source, the NTIA. The introduction of the NTIA document referred to above, clarifies the groups of people who are disadvantaged in the digital divide. These are “Minorities, low-income persons, the less educated, and children of single-parent households, particularly when they reside in

rural areas or central cities, are among the groups that lack access to information resources.” The processes in place that are driving the development of the U.S. somehow seems to make the deprivation of some people more pronounced, and in their majority, these are African Americans and Hispanics.

Affirmative Action

The title of any subject should in, and of itself, state or declare what the subject is. Hence it makes sense to define a title in discussing its subject. In Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary⁶, the word **affirm** is defined as validate, confirm, to state positively, to assert as valid or confirm, and **affirmative** is defined as asserting a predicate of a subject, asserting that the fact is so, favoring or supporting a proposition or motion. Webster’s Dictionary goes on to state that *affirmative action* is an active effort to improve the employment or educational opportunities of members of minority groups and women, which is an explanation of what affirmative action is intended to do.

To understand the subject, it is useful to examine the words that form the title. First, what does the word *affirm* validate or confirm with respect to the African American? It affirms the following facts. People of African descent were

- brought to the Americas against their will
 - made slaves
 - denied education for several decades
 - made second class citizens
 - made to feel inferior
- and the list goes on.

In considering the list above as the subject, it is by no means a stretch of the imagination to see the predicate as the poverty, the little self-love, the lack of confidence, the lack of desire to achieve and the many other attributes that are holding the African American back from achieving their full potential. To have such negative attributes implanted in any people and reinforced over decades will form a long lasting impression of negativity in the people, a conditioning that will require a concerted effort over time to eradicate.

Is it needful to correct this emotional and psychological harm that has been done to the people of African descent? If the ultimate objective is to have the African American be considered as a full citizen of the U.S. and to make an equal contribution to the development of the nation, while getting their fair share of the benefits of the nation, then the simple answer to the question above is **yes**. To that end, it is thus appropriate to have the kind of program that will erase the dehumanizing actions that had been taken against the African American in creating the negative conditioning. This is not a matter of placing blame. It is a simple act of morality. So, yes, affirmative action is necessary.

The disparity in the quality of life for the haves and have-nots in a competitive society such as the U.S. where everything is based on the dollar necessitates some assistance being given to the have-nots. Affirmative action is one way by which this situation can be

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taken care of. As Cornell West² puts it, “The historic role of American progressives is to promote redistributive measures that enhance the standard of living and quality of life for the have-nots and have-too-littles. Affirmative action was one such redistributive measure that surfaced in the heat of battle in the 1960s among those fighting for racial equality.” The need to hold historical facts regarding how such disparity came into being in perspective is essential to appreciate the need for affirmative action. Stanley Fish¹ makes this point by observing “...forgetting of history has in recent years allowed some people to argue, and argue persuasively, that affirmative action is reverse racism”, that is racism against whites. In examining reverse racism further, Stanley Fish states “...to regard their respective racisms-if that is the word-as equivalent would be bizarre, for the hostility of one group stems not from any wrong done to it but from its wish to protect its ability to deprive citizens of their voting rights, to limit access to educational institutions, to prevent entry into the economy except at the lowest and most menial levels, and to force members of the stigmatized group to ride in the back of the bus”.

Barbara Bergman states in *In Defense of Affirmative Action* “Serious implementation of affirmative action is difficult, riles many people, and requires major behavioral changes by those who will make such changes only grudgingly.” This is to be expected, since the change that redistributing the economy of the nation to favor the ‘have-nots and have-too-littles’ will disadvantage those who the current economy favor. This author goes on to explain that “Some of the opposition may come from the most valued and experienced employees, who are likely to be older white males” in discussing the impact of affirmative action in some firms. The resistance to affirmative action as Barbara Bergman points out and the idea of reverse racism negatively impacts all aspects of affirmative action as a whole.

Conclusion

In a racially mixed society such as in the US, progress of the people as a whole is dependent on contributions by all racial groups. If the government is serious about getting every child educated, then efforts must be made to undo the damage that was initially done to the African Americans and other minorities. Not only will the young people gain from being given a meaningful education, the parents of the young people will be relieved from the burden of worrying about their children’s futures. Equally important, the quality of life for the economically disadvantaged must be improved by improving their ability to earn decent wages. Practices of exclusion of any form must be eradicated. Creating a positive image and propagating it through the youth may be a useful start to this process. This may open doors for those who could be left out of the development going on through the nation, and help them take advantage of the opportunities. All Americans can then be seen as making valuable contribution to the development of the nation. This makes a strong case for equity in the educational environment in the nation.

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