

Princeton's Lesson: School Integration Is Not Enough

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PRINCETON, N. J., is frequently cited as a model of school integration. Other cities, including New York, have been urged to adopt the "Princeton Plan" which, by pairing racially imbalanced schools, succeeded in ending school segregation without fuss, without pickets, without demonstrations and without tears. Princeton, however, found good schooling is not enough. Along with it must go a change in community attitudes, opportunities for better jobs, decent housing. Therefore Princeton's experience has important lessons for other communities, North and South.

Princeton's two elementary schools were integrated 16 years ago. Thus began a three-act racial drama—first, a period of Negro hopes; next, Negro frustration and disillusionment; and then, a limited degree of fulfillment.

For its 10,800 whites, about 90 per cent of the population, the Borough of Princeton is an elegant community of 1.7 square miles. Within it are patrician homes, olde English silver shoppes, wood-paneled eating houses and the neat greens and whites of restored farm houses, all contributing to a casual, uncalculated air of good living. Dominating the community, physically and spiritually, are the gray stone buildings of Princeton University.

THE white residents of Princeton are, by any standards, extraordinary — well above the average in income and education. There are wealthy old-family Princetonians, professors, scientists, New York business commuters, writers, scholars. They are a highly intelligent, articulate, attractive, aware group, zealously intent upon thinking good thoughts, doing good deeds, promoting progressive, liberal causes, being deeply concerned with an ailing world and being, according to some, more than a little pleased with their own very excellent qualities.

The Negroes of Princeton Borough represent about 10 per cent of the population—1,200 people—and for the most part occupy a few dozen blocks in a “Negro ghetto” in the center of town. They, too, are an extraordinary group—a modest but brave echo of the values, ways and aspirations of the whites they have served for generations as cooks, chauffeurs, domestics, laundresses, gardeners and the like. Many have been in the community for decades, descendants of slaves brought North by Southern Princeton students and freed at the time of the Civil War. Today, they inhabit well-tended, tastefully furnished middle-to-lower-middle class homes on well-groomed streets. They dress well, speak well and live quiet, industrious lives. Many husbands and wives hold three or four jobs between them.

THE first act in Princeton's drama began in 1948, when 120 Negro children from the segregated Witherspoon Elementary School in the heart of the Negro ghetto were integrated with the 580 students in the all-white Nassau Street School in the white neighborhood only half a mile away.

Many whites say this was the result of an awakening of the social conscience of the community—“clearly the right thing to do.” Many Negroes, however, maintain that the step was taken because a revision in the New Jersey state constitution would have made integration mandatory. “Princeton is a privileged society,” says one Negro. “What privileged group ever willingly abandons its privileges?”

Under the Princeton Plan, the white school was converted to take all Princeton children from kindergarten to fifth grade; the Negro school became Princeton's sixth through eighth grades. The community not only integrated the student bodies but the faculties as well, and Negro principal Howard Waxwood became principal of the upper school.

Dissent was minimal ; one local newspaper failed even to mention integration. Today Princetonians offer some opinions why the Princeton Plan was put into operation so smoothly:

The white community was prepared for the move by a speaking campaign that appealed to its civic responsibility and promised that community standards would be maintained.

The Board of Education moved fast and unequivocally, permitting no time for dissent to develop and assert itself.

The physical plants and faculties of both schools were good, insuring that whites would not be faced either physically or academically by inferior facilities.

The two schools were close enough to each other so that transportation presented no substantial problem.

The number of Negroes integrated into the schools did not approach the so-called “tipping point” (over 40 per cent) the point at which, in the North, whites begin to flee.

ACT II of the racial drama, the long period of frustration, lasted from 1948 until 1960.

“We had hoped,” said one Princeton Negro, “that integrated education would be better education and that better education would give us a better chance in the white world. But we found that wasn’t so.” Most Negroes claim they led segregated lives in the integrated schools, and there were only minor changes in the matters most vital to their welfare—the attitudes of whites, and opportunities in housing and employment. This, in turn, inhibited their ability to

take full advantage of their educational opportunities. The Negroes claim that white attitudes, conscious and unconscious, had a particularly important role in “paralyzing” them, psychologically and academically, in their school work.

“I remember my daughter's first day in Princeton High,” one mother said. “She came home in tears and said, Mother, I saw Susan in the hall today and when I said hello she turned red and looked right through me. I don't know what I've done.

“I knew what had happened, of course,” said the mother, “and of course I should have warned her. But it's hard, you know. So hard to explain to a child that a small Negro is acceptable but an adult Negro is not. It wasn't Susan's fault, I tried to explain. It was just that her parents thought it better that Negroes and whites not mix. My daughter wouldn't listen to me. But Susan's father and mother are such nice people, she said. I thought to myself that integration had some advantages. If the children had to learn the facts of life, they might as well learn them young.”

“WE did what was ex- pected of us in school,” said another. “We stayed by ourselves. I've heard it said that equal academic and social opportunities were open to Negroes and that it was up to us to take advantage of them. But you don't go where you're not wanted unless you're trying to win a battle or prove a point. No one told us we couldn't mix, of course. We just knew we weren't welcome.

“Oh, there were always a few Negroes who made out — who did mix. But most of us just stayed segregated in an integrated school. The only real contact most of us had with whites was in athletics. It didn't take any brains to be an athlete, you see, so obviously that was where we belonged.”

Most Negroes wound up in the “general section” of Princeton High, thought of by many as the “dummy section.” “Lots of people, including the Negroes, assumed that that's where most of us belonged,” said one Negro. “We weren't very bright, you see. We were lazy. We were apathetic. We were the ones who made the discipline problems. That's what a lot of people said and the awful thing was that there was some truth in it. There were many Negroes who said, ‘The white man won't let me,’ instead of being honest and saying, ‘I'm not able. I didn't study hard enough.’

“BUT imagine what it did to a person always to be belittling himself,” he continued. “To have been told or shown every day that you were less than a man. Oh, Princetonians didn't put it that way, but it came through clear enough. And after you had heard it often enough you suspected that it might be true and finally things got hopeless and you stopped trying. Sometimes I wished that those teachers who knew why Hamlet did this or that or why some war took place—sometimes I wished they thought a little more about why Negroes were the way they were.”

A Negro girl, still in Princeton High, said, “When the teacher asked a question in grammar school and I knew the answer, I didn't raise my hand because I was afraid I might be wrong and that the others in the class would say, ‘Well, she's just a Negro. What else can you expect?’ ”

SCHOOL integration also had little effect on the Negroes' standing in the community. In employment most of the Negroes, frustrated by the barriers of society, were left to their traditional role as the community's servants. Very few were employed on the clerical, superintendent or professional levels—a fact which had its effect on their attitudes toward education.

"Why," asked one Negro. "should I have broken my back to do well in high school if the only job I could find afterwards was as a janitor ?"

"I'm a cook," said another, "so imagine the kind of money I earn. Sometimes I wondered whether I had a right to encourage my children to get good grades because I couldn't afford to send them to college — and college, maybe, was the one thing that might have set them apart enough to compete for jobs. Of course, some of our Negroes did do well, and they did get good jobs — but not very often in Princeton.

"There were other poor people who lived here and there still are," he continued. "Poor whites, just as poor as we were and they have had their problems here, too. But somehow, if they had initiative they could work their way out of this bind. But we just stayed stuck."

"We don't and didn't have a strong vocational program at Princeton High," said principal Howard Waxwood, "but at one time even the vocational schools wouldn't accept our Negroes because they couldn't place them after graduation."

The Princeton housing situation offered an equally difficult barrier. For generations Negroes occupied the same area in the center of town, hemmed in by the white business area and wealthy white homes. A few Princetonians labored valiantly to secure better housing for them. Between 1948 and 1960, 16 Negro families were settled in an integrated housing development and 34 more are now living in traditionally white areas-But it took time and effort to accomplish this, and in terms of the basic housing needs, the problem was barely touched.

"What good is a decent education if I can't find a job in Princeton ?" asked a Princeton Negro. "And why should I really care very much about anything if I can't ever hope to find myself a decent place to live?"

And thus ended Act II of the Princeton Plan drama —the high hopes of Act I left unrealized, psychologically and academically, in the schools and in the community, by the barriers of an apathetic or prejudiced society.

ACT III began in 1960, with the upsurge throughout the nation of sit-ins and militant civil rights agitation. For many Princeton Negroes this marked a watershed in their lives. Some now saw a glimmer of hope; the social and economic barriers began—just began—to tremble. “It was almost as if the white man looked at us for the first time,” said one Negro. This shocked, first glance caused a significant part of the community, long blind to the Negro in its back yard, to set to work.

In May, 1961, a Youth Employment Service was established to help both Negro and white 14 to 19-year-olds find part time or full time work and to give them some knowledge of how to look for a job.

In January, 1963, the Princeton Study Center was organized. It provides a study hall for Negroes and whites whose homes do not contain either adequate space to study or reference books. The center is supervised by Negroes and whites who help the children with their work and who also offer special tutoring service for students referred them by the schools.

In June, 1963, the Princeton Association for Human Rights, led by some of the town's most respected citizens, was formed. It sent 250 people, Negro and white, to the March on Washington last August. In addition, its employment committee has found jobs for a number of Negroes in companies which originally hired only whites. Awareness of the committee's activities has helped open up other jobs.

“IN Princeton High School I was advised to take the home economics course because domestic work was the only kind I'd be able to get here,” one Negro girl said. “So I decided to try New York instead and I got a job there as a secretary. I

came home last year because I want to go to Europe and living with my family was the only way I could save money. When I came back I found that Princeton had changed. I got a job as a medical secretary. I'm planning to return to Princeton when I get back from Europe — if I can find a place to live."

"Our most recent case," said a Princeton Negro associated with the human relations group, "was of a Negro who was turned down for a job he felt he was qualified to hold. He thought he'd lost it because he was a Negro. We checked the case and found that the office had been willing to hire him but he hadn't passed his medical exam; the insurance company wouldn't cover him. The Negro didn't get the job," she said, "but we all knew that there wasn't any question of discrimination and the air was cleared."

The long-active Princeton Housing Group made a house-to-house survey in October, 1963, leading to a statement signed by 73 per cent of those reached supporting the cause of equal housing opportunity.

IN September, 1963, a student civil rights group was organized in the high school. Some students have been agitating in favor of passage of the civil rights bill. Others — Negroes and whites working together — have tested the segregation that has prevailed in such places as barber shops and beauty salons. In the past some Negroes were refused service because "Negro hair is too difficult to cut." Negroes say that this discrimination no longer exists — probably because of the student activities.

Princeton University, too, has taken a strong stand. Last October it instructed its real estate office not to list for rent any units where there is evidence of owner discrimination. At the same time, President Robert Goheen reemphasized that the university was anxious to employ Negroes in other than service positions.

These are only some of the activities instituted to cope with Princeton's racial problem. The most significant change, however, is one of attitude, and it is a change that has affected many Negroes, but by no means all. It can best be seen in the high school and is best summed up by the same Negro girl who, just a few years ago in grammar school, was afraid to raise her hand in class.

"The white students," she explained, "have begun to talk to us, to be interested in us as people, in what we have to say — and a few of them have begun to invite us to their parties. Two years ago if the word 'Negro' was mentioned by chance in class I wished the floor would open up and swallow me. I was so embarrassed — so ashamed to be a Negro. But today things begin to be different. People want to know about Negroes. The subject is in the open and I'm not ashamed any longer."

"A few years ago," she said, "I would have thought college was out of the question and I wouldn't have cared. But today I know that if I want an education I can probably get it, and that perhaps I'll be able to use it. Now I care."

ACT III of the drama of the Princeton Plan has only begun, and no one deceives himself that a happy ending is close at hand. Already, however, there are some conclusions to be drawn from the history of the community's school integration.

The experience of Princeton suggests that integrated education barely begins to be an answer to basic Negro problems. By itself it may hardly affect basic relations between Negro and white. There must be much more; to be truly meaningful, educational opportunity must be supplemented by economic opportunity and by a change of social attitudes. For the Princeton Negro, an education began to have real meaning, to serve a useful purpose, only when it began to be useful in acquiring and holding a job which, in turn, might be useful in acquiring such things as better housing.

THE Negro's approach to his own welfare and education began to change when community attitudes toward him changed. For generations he had been told that he was inferior and incompetent. The result had been, in varying degrees, his psychological immobilization; frequently he had become psychologically incapable of seeking out or taking advantage of the opportunities offered him—educational or otherwise. When community attitudes began to change —attitudes of white toward Negro and, perhaps more important, the Negro toward himself — he was freed to some degree from this psychological bondage and began to be able to take advantage of his opportunity.