busing white children into black schools: a study in controversy

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In the current confusion and controversy over means of achieving school integration, an event often occurs which helps to sharpen the focus of the debate. Such was the case recently in Portland, Oregon. The catalyst was a report in the city's largest daily newspaper of an interview on September 24, 1973, by a white principal in a predominantly (ninety percent) black elementary school. In response to a question on whether whites could be bused into his school to achieve a racial balance, he commented:

"The idea of busing white kids in here is unthinkable. They would get eaten alive. This school has a strong pecking order in which physical prowess and the ability to socialize according to the rules of urban Black culture are the main determinants of status. Most white students, even those strong enough to defend themselves physically, aren't used to the social rituals of a black school — the dancing, the clothing, the jive. Whites may be accepted, but they do not become leaders."

A white kid cannot excel here. In fact, we've had several requests from white parents to have their kids bused out, which we can't do.

The roof fell in. There were immediate cries of racism from black parents, the local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P., and the black press. A resolution calling for his resignation was endorsed by at least seven organizations active in the black community. The Superintendent of the Portland Public Schools and a member of the School Board both publicly "completely disavowed" the remarks of the principal. An investigation of what he "actually" said was begun by school officials, and there were hints that he should resign to restore "public confidence in the schools."

On the surface, much of the controversy surrounded the language chosen by the principal, i.e., "They would get eaten alive." The crux of the matter, though, was not in what he said, but in what he implied — that black schools are not like white schools and the fall of busing white children into black schools means the sacrifice of white children at the altar of "urban black culture." (Only an editorial in the black community newspaper mentioned the busing of nearly 2,000 black children into white schools and whether they are eaten alive, but more on this later.) People took from the principal's comments what suited them — and responded accordingly — whites wanted no two way busing; blacks who believed there are no "real" differences between blacks and whites; school officials who hope to avoid federal mandatory regulations by supporting a voluntary program of allowing blacks, but not whites, to be bused out of the predominantly black schools; white parents in the receiving schools who wondered what was happening in their neighborhood school with the black children who were presently bused in; and the black parents from the principal's own school who denied they or their children possessed any distinctive black culture which meant white children had to fear for their physical safety. Over and above all this, the black newspaper was condemning the principal for the "glorification of the seamier side of ghetto culture."

Having slowly twisted in the wind for several months, the principal, at this writing, still holds to his position. He has been able to muster some few voices of support in the black community and the school administrators have decided the "incident does not indicate he should be transferred from his post."

Although school officials have seemingly taken the stance that the interview is best interpreted as a "non-event" which never really happened, for a brief moment it was possible to view the schisms that are continually defined and denied away, to observe contending positions argued with passion, and to find the subtlety of ideology emerge from under the rocks of objectivity.

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The events unfolded as follows:

September 24, 1973. Item: The principal of Boise Elementary School in Portland gives an interview to the larger of the two daily newspapers. The thrust of the article is to explore what has happened to this particular school since it has lost over 200 black students who are being bused out to receiving white schools. The article is encouraging when it describes what can now happen at Boise School with no overcrowding and the resultant drop in student-teacher ratio. The consequences are described as higher levels of teacher-pupil interaction in smaller classes. The question is posed to the principal whether the decrease in the total number of students would open opportunities for whites to be bused into Boise School to achieve a more integrated situation. His answer was that given at the beginning of this article.

September 25. Item: The following day in the same newspaper a report is given of the meeting of the Portland School Board the prior evening. The article is entitled "Removal of Boise principal urged over 'racist' remarks." The President of the Portland N.A.A.C.P. had come to the Board meeting and called the remarks of the principal "vindictive, prejudicial and racist." He also called for the ouster of the principal. In response, the Board members noted the issue was a "personnel matter," but both the Superintendent and a Board member said they joined the President of the N.A.A.C.P. in "completely disavowing" the principal's remarks. The Superintendent also noted that the comments were