



monthly report

THE INSTITUTE OF THE BLACK WORLD
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Education and Black People: Some Personal and Organizational Reflections

As the nation limps, morose and afraid, toward the heart of its bicentennial season, it seems altogether fitting that Boston, the celebrated gem of American democracy, has again violently engraved its name in the annals of the struggle against Black education and freedom. As we watch still more of our children under physical attack while trying to "get a good education" in hostile and white-controlled environments, we are forced to ask ourselves anew what a "good education" really is.

IBW's director, Vincent Harding, answered this and the more profound question, "Education for What?" when he spoke to a group of Black and Chicano superintendents and administrators from across the country at a conference at Georgia's Lake Lanier last summer. The educators were meeting to discuss some of the "Current Issues in Public Finance." Because we think the message deserves a wider audience, we are publishing an edited excerpt from the speech as our lead article this month. We will make the entire document available as an occasional paper.

Part of our quest for a "good education" at IBW is posing and trying to answer difficult questions about ourselves and our struggle. We explored many unanswered questions about the future of Black people (especially, "Where do we go from here?") in our 1974 summer program. A photographic essay (pp. 4-5) describes the summer's activities. We will report on the results of the summer's work in a future issue.

As some of you may know, Vincent Harding and his family are now in Philadelphia on a temporary mission. Undertaken at the end of the summer, the move was part of the joint search by the Hardings and the rest of us here for our own adequate answer to the question, "Education for What?" We have asked Vincent to share with all of our readers some of the thinking which created the decision -- ideas which we have explored together for nearly two years at IBW. "On the Education of Children (and Parents) for a Time of Protracted Struggle" (p. 6) is his response.

Education for What?

I come in the midst of your discussion on public school finances. It is a discussion which is surely essential to your work, but it is also one which could engage all of our energies and thought, could distort our perspective, could emerge eventually as nothing more than a technical, administrative and bureaucratic exercise. Thus, it might finally serve as an impediment to the ultimate sense of purpose which must shape and focus our work.

As we wrestle with such matters as where the money is, who controls it, how it can be accounted for, the central issue must never be blurred: What is the financing for? In a time of political, economic and cultural crisis, speaking to a group that is overwhelmingly Black, dealing with persons who consider themselves as educational leaders or administrators (and they are not the same), the question must be faced directly.

Of course, on a certain level, the answer is obvious, and you may easily throw it back at me. The financing, you say, is for the education of our children -- and, I hope our adults. We are concerned with financing in order to be able to support the education of our people, for which we have an increasingly direct responsibility.

That is a logical reply. But that perfectly acceptable answer only pushes us back to a prior, deeper question, one which provides the real focus for much that I have to say. For the next question is: *education for what?* Beyond techniques, management strategies, power struggles and personal advancement, what are the essential purposes, goals and directions of the education in which we are involved? Are the directions in which we are headed the same as the ones in which we ought to be going? Indeed, is there any direction at all, save for keeping the lid on?

Almost as an aside, let me make this point: If *we* do not think seriously about the question of *education for what?*, if *we* do not face the issue of goals and purposes, the question will not go unanswered. Others will consider it and answer it for us and for our children. Look for instance, at the burgeoning movement for "career education" which has been inspired and directed by the business community of this country. *They* know what they want education to be for: to provide them with a reasonably educated labor force which is imbued with their values and mystified by their justifications from as early an age as is possible. And they are already pressing forward their goals, purposes and directions on our children.

Against such pressures, which are deep within the mainstream of American education, I would propose another way to answer the question: *education for what?* In the light of our history as Black people, in the light of the special position we still hold as a Black presence in a white, racist society, in the light of our potential ties to the oppressed and exploited peoples in the non-white world, I say that the education we support should be education for creative dissent, for disciplined disruption and transformation of America as we know it.

Let me quickly say that I am not talking about "doing-your-own-thingism," nor about romantic terrorism, or a revolutionary rhetoric which has no disciplined, historically based substance. I am certainly not speaking about a goal which is to be quickly or painlessly realized.

Rather, I speak of an education which will release and encourage ferment, which will engender dissatisfaction with what is and develop painfully honed visions of the possibilities which humans may yet create for the good of their society. I speak of an education which will urge our young people to *rethink themselves and everything else around them*, an education which will allow them no false peace, which will demand that they make real, hard decisions about their lives and their commitments.

Actually, as you surely recognize by now, the issue of *education for what?* presses us to an even more fundamental question: what kind of society do we want, do we need, are we committed to? Is America as we know it now the only game on the block, or are there, hiding in our own minds and spirits, yet undreamed possibilities of radical transformation which will create a new America? What kind of social, economic and political institutions are needed for us to become more human, to evolve forward into our greatest potentials as women and men, to move beyond mere greedy acquisitiveness (and the