

# THE DESEGREGATION OF A BOSTON CLASSROOM

BY KIM MARSHALL

Until last September, I was an oddity in American education—a white teacher with five years' experience who had never taught a white student. Teaching at Boston's all-black Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School had been an intense, deeply fulfilling experience for me, and I was not really looking forward to the court-ordered desegregation plan that was about to go into effect.

I had had little experience with white students. My perceptions of them were so tainted by images of bratty, overprivileged kids that I was unsure whether I would *like* my new white students or be able to treat them fairly.

I wasn't the only one with reservations about the plan. A week before classes began, several angry white parents visited the school and declared they would never send their kids there. "I've been up here," said one mother. "I know what happens. I know about *them*." One father, picking up on the school's obvious black orientation, complained that he'd seen posters of Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver, but none of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln. What he didn't know was at that very moment I was teetering on a stepladder in my classroom carefully integrating my previously all-black poster collection, though not quite along the lines he had in mind, I'm sure. Bertrand Russell went up next to Malcolm X; Mozart next to Louis Armstrong; Robert Redford next to Diana Ross. It wasn't until much later in the year that I

finally found a poster of the Great Emancipator and put it up in what little space was left on the walls.

We teachers also had to contend with cynical looks from some black parents who visited the school and noticed improvements in both our attitudes and the physical plant. I had come in during the summer to sand and varnish the floor in my classroom as part of an ongoing effort to make the place more livable, and I was prepared for the accusation that I'd only done it because white kids were coming to the school that year. But no one said anything directly.

The improvement in teacher attitudes was indeed dramatic. The integration plan seemed to offer a chance for a fresh start, and the entire King staff was willing to make every effort to make it work. In the euphoria of the opening weeks of school, one teacher's warning that we might not be able to maintain the enthusiasm went almost unheeded. In retrospect, an equally important part of the surge in our morale was a full week of staff meetings before school opened for the kids. There were almost no more meetings like those for the rest of the year, which accounted for many of our later problems.

## Spontaneous Integration

Against a backdrop of worldwide publicity about the riots and stoning in South Boston, the opening days of the King School were almost too good to be true. The 17 buses that rolled up to the school on the first day didn't carry many white kids, but as the word

got out that the school had never had a smoother opening and was running beautifully, more and more white students trickled in, and more and more pledges of "No way!" turned into resigned declarations of "Oh, well; let's give it a try." Some of the white kids were actually traveling a shorter distance to school than they had in previous years—a reflection of how neighborhood patterns had been distorted.

My new class included 16 black, 9 white and 5 Hispanic children. From the very first day, my instinct was to avoid a self-conscious approach to the issue of race and instead to open up the class and carefully monitor what I hoped would be a spontaneous process of integration. Over the last few years, in an attempt to reshape a conventional sixth grade classroom into a more decentralized, child-centered one, I had developed a "learning station" system. Building on this program, I started the kids off at integrated tables and allowed them to talk and interact within the limits of reasonable behavior and the work requirements. I was delighted to see one close interracial friendship after another forming. The kids seemed almost unaware of race in choosing their friends, relying instead on the inexplicable chemistry that naturally draws people to one another. Equally important, my preconceptions of "overprivileged" white kids turned out to be groundless; the white students shared almost the same personal, family and social problems as the black students I'd come to know over the

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past five years. And why not? They had all grown up in the same urban blight, had all gone to lower-class Boston schools. Their skin color didn't make much difference.

After two weeks, I asked the class to break up into semipermanent groups of four or five students of their own choosing. Happily, and with no interference from me, the first groups they formed were all integrated, and most stayed integrated the rest of the year. When two all-black groups emerged later on, I let them be, reasoning that as long as the choices were made spontaneously on the basis of personality (which they seemed to be), there was nothing wrong with two all-black groups in a seven-group classroom. (All the groups were integrated in terms of ability, and the absence of tracking was probably more important to learning than anything else.)

What eventually bothered me more was that the groups tended to split along boy/girl lines. I'd been led by the school to accept this sexual segregation as normal for the age group and even to encourage it as a way of cutting down boy/girl problems. So I thought nothing of such routine practices as taking separate girls' and

boys' attendances, lining boys and girls up separately to go home or to the cafeteria, sending the boys to industrial arts and the girls to home economics. But as time went on, I began to question the validity of this sexual segregation. It's a question I hope to deal with in my own classroom and around the school in the coming year.

### The First Crisis

A conflict early in the school year reaffirmed our commitment to integration. An administrative order ruled that the school elect a biracial student council by a balloting process that allowed the students to vote only for representatives of their own race. Kids throughout the school reacted strongly; several white kids in my class were furious that they couldn't vote for their black friends. Everyone resisted when told to line up for two separate assemblies, one for black students, one for white students, and there were reports of heightened tensions and fighting all over the school.

It was the first time anyone had made mention of race in what seemed a negative way ("All the black students line up here"), and the kids were full of indignation. The Hispanic students in my class weren't sure which assem-

bly to attend, since they had never been asked to decide whether they were black or white, and they were clearly embarrassed about their predicament. They ended up making their decisions on the basis of which assembly their friends went to.

It was an intensely uncomfortable situation for everyone concerned. I considered refusing to send my kids to either assembly on the grounds that such separation was unconstitutional, but I wasn't sure enough of my legal ground to defy orders. Reluctantly, I sent the kids along, telling them as they went that I thought the whole thing was disgraceful.

While the black kids were down at their assembly, rumors circulated that they were plotting ways to beat up the white kids. When they returned to the classroom, several white students actually hugged their black friends when they learned it wasn't true. Together, we fired off letters of protest to the principal. One girl wrote, "We should be one big family, or at least try." When the principal visited our room the next day, one boy brazenly walked up to her and said, "Excuse me, but why did you separate us like that?" Her explanation was that she had been required to do so by a superior in response to a court decision.

### Interracial Conflicts

Although the general atmosphere in the classroom bespoke a natural, spontaneous, human interaction, there were the inevitable negative incidents. During the first few weeks of school, I had an ongoing series of clashes with a very troubled black girl in my class. She swore at me, refused to finish her work, copied from other kids, walked out of the room at the wrong times, accused me of being prejudiced, and began to draw two other girls into the same behavior. One afternoon, the three of them tormented a white girl during a movie in the assembly hall and precipitated a crisis that got our counselor

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and a youth worker involved. Through a team effort, we were able to bring about a positive change in the black girl's behavior, but we knew we had only begun to deal with her problems.

Later in the year, a pushing game in the girls' line developed into a hair-pulling, scratching, kicking fight between this girl and the same white girl she had tormented in the assembly hall. I walked the class out of the school and had a brief talk with the two girls, both of whom I found surprisingly open to negotiation. They agreed that the real reason for the fight, beyond being pushed into each other in the line, was that they hated each other's guts, and that the only way to prevent future problems was for each to stay out of the other's way.

This reasoning didn't seem very satisfactory to me; I still thought everyone should get along as brothers and sisters. But the more I thought about it, the more logical it seemed that there will always be some people who dislike each other at a gut, chemical level, without any consideration for race, creed or national origin. Both girls had black and white friends in the class, so it seemed reasonable to believe their dislike didn't spring from prejudice. It was just that they were totally different kinds of kids (tough and hip versus somewhat goody-goody) and had a genuine personality clash. I decided that their own solution—to accept that they would never be friends and to try to stay apart to avoid being enemies—was very sensible. And it worked; they managed to stick to their agreement for the remainder of the year.

At first, interracial conflicts of any kind made me uptight, though they were usually ignored by most of my students. For a while, one black boy would include the word "white" with other epithets he used to curse people out, but when he didn't get much reaction, he dropped it. Another black boy called a black girl a "honkey lover" for sitting with a group of white girls—until he remembered he sat

with a white boy himself and backed off. And once when the "goody-goody" white girl got into a fight with a black boy and called him a "bloody bastard" (no racial epithets here, even in the heat of battle), we were able to talk the fight out and find an easy solution. It turned out the girl had told the boy to stop doing something, provoking the normal reaction from a kid given orders by an unappointed teacher's agent. Undoubtedly, the girl had been encouraged to do this kind of bossing around by other teachers, and she must have been somewhat taken aback when I asked her to leave the bossing around to me.

Overall, as the year went on, I found myself breaking up and talking out the few interracial fights with less and less thought about color. The issues just didn't have anything to do with that.

More distressing were the racially based insults hurled by some black kids at each other—"jungle nigger," "black spook" and so forth. These insults, along with the fact that most fights in the room were between one black kid and another, tempted me to deliver speeches about blacks "getting themselves together" and being aware of the impression they were creating in the minds of their white classmates.

But I always stopped myself, because I knew this was something a white teacher was in no position to do. Besides, I feared it might only contribute to the negative self-images from which the insults and the fighting sprang. So I continued to talk out the disputes without mention of race, and over the months, this approach seemed to work; there was a steady decline in fighting and name-calling, and everyone's self-image seemed to improve and flourish in the openness of the classroom.

## Personal Insecurities

It was my own insecurities and lack of confidence that aggravated some of the conflicts. An example was the Thursday afternoon I took my class to the school library. Most of the period

went smoothly, until two girls got into a particularly violent and bitter fight. As I tried to talk to the girls, two other girls got involved in a heated verbal exchange with the librarian, and the room became more and more noisy. I was getting very flustered and embarrassed at the impression my class was making, when a man I didn't know stepped into the room and announced: "I'm security. I'm taking over." He proceeded to harangue the kids for five minutes about how he had never seen such shocking behavior, while they sat in stunned silence wondering who he was and watching my face get redder and redder.

The incident took me back six years to my first days of teaching when I was often made to feel like an incompetent white liberal with no control over my class. It left me bitter for several days, but I finally talked it out with my kids, admitting my embarrassment. I even invited the man (who turned out to be a member of something called a "stabilization team" assigned to the school during a particularly tense period in the fall) into my classroom to explain to him that I had a rigorous, carefully structured program that was not open to the criticism of being "permissive" or out of control, regardless of how bad things had looked in the library. Only afterward did I realize how defensive I still was about my teaching, how overly sensitive I was to the impressions of outsiders.

There were several occasions during the year when I was accused by my students of being prejudiced and of showing favoritism. At first, I didn't have the confidence in my impartiality to deal with such accusations in a level, nondefensive way. Some of the kids sensed my insecurity and took advantage of my openness to criticism by pouncing on me whenever I didn't treat black kids and white kids exactly the same. But after a few obviously bogus complaints, I pulled myself together and delivered a table-thumping oration about how I felt I had more than proved my impartiality

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and resented all this doubting and nagging. I also told the kids I would only listen to complaints that were polite and specific.

More often than not, accusations of any racial discrimination on my part were frustrated expressions of other problems I was familiar with. During the learning-station time, for example, while kids are working on their assignments for the day, there is always a tremendous demand for my attention and help, and it is often a delicate, diplomatic process keeping one impatient kid waiting while I help another who requested help first. When students accused me of being prejudiced because I didn't help them first, I brushed the accusations aside, knowing that it wasn't the real issue. The solution came over the months as the kids gained more confidence and competence in doing the work on their own, or learned to ask for help from their friends.

On an earlier occasion, a black girl whom I'd told to stop typing during the quiet reading time at the end of the day said that I wouldn't have told her to stop if she was white. Although I flubbed the incident at the time (congratulating her sarcastically for making the first racial comment of the year), it became clear to me later that this was simply an issue of equal treatment of students. I have since decided that the best approach to this problem is to repeat the child's frustrated complaint back to her—T.E.T. style—without the racial component ("You really feel frustrated that you can't type when other kids have gotten away with it in the past") and see where the dialogue leads.

## Elements of Success

In retrospect, I think the most important element in the improvement in human relationships in my classroom was the actual structure of the room—the informality; the lack of embarrassing and intimidating situations of kids being called on in front of the whole class; the focus on group work;

where no one is left behind and everyone helps one another rather than competing for grades and brownie points; the implicit emphasis on the importance of getting along together and learning about each other.

We watched the ABC movie *Eye of the Storm*, in which a teacher in an all-white school simulated discrimination by treating the brown-eyed kids as second-class citizens one day, then maltreating the blue-eyed kids the next day. My kids were impressed by the message, but what was missing was a clear picture of the kinds of treatment black people have suffered in America.

A week or so after we saw the movie, I noticed a black and a white girl looking through *The Black Book*, an excellent compilation of pictures and text bearing on the black experience. They gasped as they came upon a grisly picture of a lynch mob posing behind the charred body of a black man, most of the white men smiling at the camera. After a few moments, the white girl said, "Boy, those people sure must have been mean." The picture had clearly had more impact than the movie, and it was quietly passed around the room during the next few days.

I also did two very simple things to improve self-images around the room: I took snapshots of the kids and put 50 or so of them on the wall on colorful cardboard, and I installed a full-length mirror in the back of the room. I was delighted to see kids constantly going back to check themselves out.

## Exploring Differences

It wasn't long before the kids began losing their inhibitions and exploring their physical differences. One day I looked across the cafeteria to see black and white kids giggling as they felt each other's hair. Another time, a black boy came up to me and said, "Mr. Marshall, I've noticed that black people have bigger noses and lips than white people. Is that true?" Given the integration propaganda that black and

white people are the same except for skin color, I think this boy was relieved to be told that yes, wider lips and nostrils are characteristics of blacks, just as slanted eyes are characteristics of Orientals and lighter beards of American Indians.

The question of skin color was more tricky. One morning as I was taking attendance, several kids were looking over my shoulder and noticed the columns marked "Black," "White" and "Other" in the attendance book (a record I was required to keep as a result of a court order). A white boy asked me what it meant, and when I explained it, he grabbed a black girl's arm and said, "That isn't black. It's brown!" He didn't say it meanly, so I pointed to his skin and said, "You call that white? That's pink!" Everyone laughed and felt relieved, and we talked about how saying black and white was just a simplification and not really accurate.

But it wasn't long before the question of why some black kids are lighter than others came up, this time in a discussion I was having with a small group of boys during the learning-station time. I explained that some black kids had more white blood than others, and braced for the reaction. "I ain't got no white blood in me! My father ain't white!" I replied, "Sure you do, but it's further back in your family, several generations back. You have white blood in you just like I have black blood in me."

Stunned silence, and they were ready to learn something new. I proceeded to explain that the first human beings were black, and that light-skinned people developed later, by natural selection, to survive in temperate climates. It made us all feel much closer.

Dialect differences proved to be no problem at all. I'd always liked the sound and structure of black English ("I been knowing that"; "You all right for a teacher, Mr. Marshall"; "Matthew up there bogarting that map!") and wondered whether I would lose a

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lot of it with the influx of straight-talking white students. But I found that many of my white students had absorbed some black English and were talking their own nonstandard English dialect. There seemed little question that black English was a more powerful linguistic influence than a teacher's or a parent's standard English.

My approach to the question of nonstandard dialects continues to be: (1) not to condemn them or call them wrong; (2) to speak and write in standard English myself; and (3) to develop the kids' "translation" skills and their ability to be "bilingual" between nonstandard and standard English, teaching them when and where to use each one. But I don't have nearly enough material yet—that's something I'm working on.

### All-Class Discussions

With all the publicity about the stabbing and stoning and fighting in South Boston and Hyde Park that surrounded us, class discussions in which the kids could ask questions and express their feelings were essential. When several black boys in my class heard that the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party were sending "representatives" to South Boston to help out the anti-busing forces, they were gripped with fear and needed to be reassured that the Klan wouldn't venture into Roxbury.

Sometimes, explanations were not so easy to come by. In reference to the busing plan, one black boy remarked, "There wouldn't be all this trouble if they hadn't moved the kids around." He was right, and it was hard to argue the abstract, long-range benefits of integration against the reality of all the disruption and violence. It was even harder to explain how the Boston School Committee's gerrymandering and subtle policies of segregation over the years had added to the de facto segregation that already existed in Boston and led to the federal court decision to desegregate the entire city.

I had more success in a discussion about the inequalities between Boston and its belt of affluent suburbs. I talked about the kinds of things I'd seen in suburban and private schools that the King School didn't have. The kids were fascinated, and several wanted to know why the people who moved to the suburbs didn't still help the city so that the schools could be more equal. The only honest answer I could give was that most of them didn't care.

One white boy said that they would end up paying for it in the end when they or their children came into the city and became victims of crime and violence. It was a bitterly perceptive comment, and hard to argue with. The kids didn't need any courses on urban sociology and class stratification to know what was going on, and this urban-suburban class issue drew kids together and made the busing plan seem relatively insignificant.

In the end, I gave up trying to reason, and pointed to a whacky, perfectly delightful white kid in the class and said, "Look at it this way—without the busing, you would never have met him, and what a loss that would have been!" He beamed, everyone laughed, and we dropped the subject for the time being.

Later in the year, I spent an idyllic Saturday driving around the city with a group of six girls. We climbed Blue Hill, visited a museum, had lunch at my wife's and my apartment, saw the airport and a skyscraper. At the end of the day, as we rounded the corner onto Blue Hill Avenue, one of the black girls said, "Well, back to the ghetto." She didn't say it bitterly or morosely—it was almost apologetic—but it filled me with sadness.

### Much More to Be Done

The school didn't sustain its strong beginning; by March it showed most of the symptoms of being a standard ghetto school again, complete with several ugly interracial incidents in the corridors. As the teacher had warned

at the beginning of the year, the greatest danger was in not sustaining our efforts and enthusiasm, and it became clear that much, much more was required to make a middle school in a tough, poor neighborhood into a really good school.

I remember playing Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech to my kids while they read along with the words:

*I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood . . . that one day, right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.*

As the speech reached its stirring conclusion, a black boy called me over and said, "You know, Mr. Marshall, I think it's going to work out. I really do."

Now, as Boston's desegregation plan moves into its second phase, I think of the kids in my classroom getting along so easily and naturally within a school that is so rigidly segregated by class, and I know there's a lot more to it than racial mixing. Boston has forced the integration of poor blacks and poor whites, but has done virtually nothing to bring them into day-to-day contact with the children of its more affluent suburbs, which dramatically misses the point of integration—to bring everyone in America, from all races and all classes, together. I'm glad to be teaching a desegregated class, but this is only the beginning of true integration. ■

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