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THE MAIN PROBLEM OF BLACK DEAF PEOPLE: EDUCATION

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Some say that blacks are not positively oriented toward work, but are alienated from it. Blacks generally are just as anxious to work and get ahead as whites, and in some cases, more so. The real problem is that these black deaf persons have had no work orientation. Blacks do not have to be coerced to work. The only work incentive needed is a decent job at decent wages, which most black deaf people do not have simply because they have not been properly educated or have been denied the opportunity to perform on specific jobs, because these jobs have traditionally been reserved for whites.

All that black people need is an equal chance to produce. The term “black deaf problems” is misleading. Our problems become society’s problems, because it is our society which has forced the black deaf population to live in ignorance and poverty.

Most of our black deaf people are functionally illiterate. This prevents them from acquiring good jobs. Most of these people resign themselves to menial work, because during their school days they have very few highly educated teachers, or the teachers give them the impression that they are dumb and that there are a great many things that black deaf people can not do.

Many blacks believe that certain jobs are cut out for whites and certain others reserved for blacks. If you are deaf and black, no matter how talented you are, or how talented you think you are, there is still the nagging question of whether the opportunity will present itself. When you are black there is always a question about opportunity. Many black deaf people have talent and at the same time wonder whether they will get a chance to prove it. Sometime they wonder whether to even apply for a position. This is especially true when you are dealing in areas where blacks have not been accepted.

Many blacks have attended schools for the deaf for thirteen years or more only to graduate at the first to third grade academic achievement level. This is especially true of the previously segregated schools in the South. However, the northern schools have not done much better. Upon graduation,

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the job tools of the deaf black man are picks and shovels. We do not need schools for the deaf to teach black deaf, or any other deaf people, how to dig ditches and wash dishes. We live in a money-oriented society, so the financial deprivation of black deaf is certainly a social deprivation. If the black deaf person received a good education he could pay his club dues, dress decently, and then I doubt if he would have trouble joining some all-white clubs of the deaf.

In black schools for the deaf, the average intelligent quotient is low and it drops steadily as the students grow older. Adolescents depart from their schools ill-prepared to lead a satisfying, useful life or to participate in the community. Black deaf persons have seldom been provided with an educational experience that allowed them to express freely their feelings and opinions. Since they cannot talk out their feelings, they act them out in a detrimental way. This is another reason black deaf persons find it difficult to belong.

The usefulness and unimportance of education has been communicated to black children in indirect ways. This has served to decrease their motivation to learn and to decrease their aspirations for educational goals.

We need more black professional people to serve as models for our younger generation and the only way to accomplish this is to train our black deaf students, in schools and classes for the deaf, to be future leaders. We must evaluate what the schools for the deaf are doing with our black deaf pupils. We can not solve the problem without knowing its origin or cause.

Although Gallaudet College is over a century old, it has graduated only a handful of black students, with its first graduate in the fifties. And from this handful approximately one-half came from public school settings. Perhaps we need to take a hard look at the way in which schools for the deaf encourage, or discourage their black students to take the Gallaudet College admission examination. When this is done, the question of "black deaf problems" will be minimized.

Information about jobs and schooling opportunities has not been made accessible to black deaf people. The black deaf person does not hear about continuing education, speech and hearing programs, traineeships, fellowships, scholarships, job openings, and the like unless he is fortunate enough to be working in a rare integrated setting.

Young black deaf workers under thirty appear to be far and away the most dissatisfied with their jobs. After age forty-four, these people express less dissatisfaction and not too many complaints are heard. It appears that older blacks feel that just being employed is reason enough to be satisfied with their work lives.

Most black deaf people do not get good jobs and when they do acquire jobs they don't have a chance to do meaningful work, to achieve and grow on the job. Upward mobility appears to be nil for most black deaf people.

This dissatisfaction cannot be removed by equal employment opportunity alone. There must also be equal consumer opportunity: the minority

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group dollar must buy the same amounts and kinds of housing, education, and other consumer goods as does the dollar of other citizens. But before we have equal consumer opportunity we must have this before there is even the chance of equal consumer opportunity.

Nauseating memories of my experience while teaching in a school for the deaf in the South include the mornings when I sat at my desk alone, while my students filed out of the classroom to change clothes so they could remove glass, stone, and weeds from the practice field so that the white football team could safely practice. While these black deaf students were clearing the football field, the white students were in class learning. The black deaf students, who had no ball of their own, watched the white team practice daily, hoping they could touch the ball as well as play. What do you say to a kid except that you cannot participate because you are black?

In conclusion, I urge that black deaf people be treated as humans, educate them and evaluate them on the basis of their skills, not race, and you will quickly note an all around improvement in their performances. Downgrade them, give them an inferior education, criticize and neglect them, tell them they cannot cope with our society's demands and we will have another five hundred years of discussing "black deaf problems".