

# How Do the Teachers Feel?

*When southern schools desegregate, the attention of the country is focused on the children, both Negro and white, who are the principal actors in the drama of historic change. But the teachers who carry on their professional duties in these classrooms, often in spite of strong personal feelings, also play a vital role in the social revolution that is desegregation. Their story is told here by Robert Coles, a child psychiatrist who spent two years in the deep South establishing a close acquaintanceship with the first Negro children to attend white schools in Atlanta and New Orleans, with their white classmates, and with their teachers. Dr. Coles is consultant to the Southern Regional Council, which sponsored the research on which this article is based. Financial support for the project was provided by the New World Foundation and the General Education Board. Dr. Coles is also Research Psychiatrist, Harvard University Health Services.*

BY ROBERT COLES

**H**E WAS a teacher weary enough at that moment to be openly competitive with his students: "Every one worries about the children, but I think desegregation is harder on us than anyone." A tall, soft-spoken, rather reserved man born forty years ago in a small town in southeast Georgia, he had his say with those few words and changed the subject rather directly. He taught history in a high school, and now he was taking part in history simply by staying at his job in one of the four schools in Atlanta that together admitted nine Negro youths in the autumn of 1961. It was history for him, too. He put it this way: "I almost had to pinch myself that first day when they came down the hall; and when the girl walked into my classroom I have to admit I was as confused as the boys and girls. You could hear a pin drop. In all my years of teaching I've never had a class so quiet. And it lasted for weeks. . . . It was real strange, the way she'd come in and a kind of stillness came over all of us. . . . Talk about learning; we sure have been getting some."

Such direct expressions are not rare over the South today. Our country has given most of its attention to the legal and political struggle there; and when the sheer horror of conflict has pressed hard during riots or violence we have noticed particular children and their families. Largely overlooked, as always, are the overwhelming majority of people, white and Negro alike, who have been strongly if unostentatiously affected by desegregation; and among them school teachers surely qualify.

For several years I have been speaking with Southern teachers, individually and in groups, and I have learned much from them. I had first thought

they would tell me about the children, tell me how the Negro and white children in freshly desegregated schools were managing. I can recall the first meeting I had with a group of teachers in Atlanta. We had been talking about how nervous but curiously excited the children seemed. Many white boys and girls were incredulous at first—an entire way of life was vanishing before their eyes, for some none too soon, for most in surprisingly casual fashion. A teacher bent on summarizing told us how a white boy had approached him at the end of the first day of school and said words to this effect: "I'm against it, but it's probably better than

fighting a civil war. Maybe they should have tried this in 1860." That moment of generational pride may have set loose the next comment from one of the teachers: "You can't study desegregation just through the eyes of the children. In fact I'll bet many of these youngsters say one thing at home, when they're near their parents, but when they're at school it can be another matter. I find myself torn like that. I never wanted this, but now we have to live with it, and whatever I say at home has nothing to do with what I have to do every day I come to work."

His warning was valuable. Enormous legal and political effort has finally enabled the entrance of the smallest handful of Negro students in certain Southern white schools. Where this has happened we say desegregation has been accomplished, and while it is happening we concentrate our attention upon the Negro students and their watching white classmates. Sometimes mobs in all their densely packed filtration of malice and fear command our attention. When they have been dispersed we feel we can lose interest and even concern. Desegregation is proceeding quietly, we are relieved to know. In a matter of days, only rarely in a matter of months, cities and towns unknown or dimly known and kept in the mind's storage—Clinton, Little Rock, Oxford—come to a flash of scandalous and arresting recognition soon followed by a relapse to their former neglect, which is qualified only by the significance of their new place in history.

The teacher in Atlanta was indicating that desegregation was more than a problem of getting a few children into a school building, that it affected their parents and teachers, too. A teacher in Little Rock was making the same point, and in addition trying to fit the whole



—Wide World.

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problem into some historical context: "Most people never thought of us (Little Rock) and then people couldn't forget us if they tried. But after the troops turned the mobs away people slowly started forgetting us again. You'd think that was all there was to desegregation. I think there's more going on in Central High that's important now than five years ago, but no one knows about it the way they know we had trouble here once . . . the real news is what's happening to the attitudes of the students of both races, and the teachers, too."

Perhaps the struggles of the young are more fashionable in America. In any event, Southern school teachers have had their share of tension, fear, and marked uncertainty in the past few years of slowly spreading school desegregation. Not very often do professional men and women find themselves unexpectedly or unwittingly in a severe social crisis that challenges the delicate and often undefined relationship between personal beliefs and occupational activity. Every day our private feelings shape or at least affect our work, but seldom do either private feelings or indeed the everyday commitment to one's job become national issues. In the words of a teacher in New Orleans, "The crowds outside wanted me to boycott the schools, too; and I was with them, then, to be truthful. I mean I was opposed to desegregation. But I had my job as a teacher, and I just couldn't walk out of the building like that."

Many Southern teachers have faced similarly perplexing choices. An entire life can be brought into a new focus under such confusing situations. Some have been forewarned. A high school teacher in Atlanta, a delicately boned lady with a bun of graying blonde hair that always made me imagine its unfolding, once told me of that summer: "I just came home and decided I'd never go there again. It wasn't the Negroes being in college with me; it was everything about New York . . . the rudeness there was shocking . . . and I think the nigras up there have much worse manners than they do down here. You see, they've been told to go there and get away from the 'terrible' South, but when they've done it and gone north they find they're in the worst ghettos in the country. They're much worse off than they'd be in a cabin in the country. And even in our large cities like Atlanta people don't live like that. Even white people in those slums up there must be affected."

Her experiences that summer were not unusual for many people who come to New York from small towns all over America. She dwelled at length on

the racial aspects of her time there, but I often felt that had she come from any small town, East, West, or North as well, her reactions might have been somewhat similar. Her important early years were spent on a small south Georgia farm. She had left that by the age of seventeen to go to college in Atlanta, a magnet for towns all over the Southeast. She describes it best; "I lost a lot of my prejudices the way you have to in a big city. I mean all living becomes more impersonal. Before, I knew the nigras I hated and the ones I really loved. Now, I didn't much care about any of them, one way or the other. So, when they desegregated the busses, I thought, 'why not?' But when they started talking about desegregating the schools it became much more personal again. I kept on thinking about my reactions in New York, and how just sitting in the same cafeteria with a nigra made me feel so upset. . . . It was getting close to home again when I thought of teaching nigra children. I just couldn't really picture it happening."

**Y**ET, she had eventually "adjusted" to the presence of Negro school teachers in a classroom with her. She left New York, in her words, "friendly with them." They were, after all, pleasant, well spoken, educated women, whose tastes were quite a bit like her own. She had always thought that given more education Negroes would deserve most rights held by whites. That kind of thought had helped her when her American idealism collided with her Southern rearing. Now she had sweated through that collision in real life and afterwards felt rather happy at its outcome.

On the other hand, a summer's time in New York had largely been forgotten. It happened far away, and out of the ordinary context of her life. But Negro children in her classroom, in her state of Georgia, seemed hardly believable to her, and she opposed the idea. In retrospect one day she tried to tell how she felt: "I just didn't believe it would work. I've known nigras all my life, and I didn't think they would adjust to our schools. I have nothing against them. I just thought their minds weren't like ours. And I *still* think many of them have a long way to go. . . . Yes, I'm ready now to let those who can do it come to our schools. That's where I have changed. . . ."

I have watched this teacher struggle for two years with herself, her past, and her present situation; with her life as it has daily unfolded itself over this time. New York City arrived in her backyard two years ago, and she had to go

through another startling confrontation, another adjustment of an irrational past to a very real, very demanding present. Her *job* was to transmit and clarify the fact of American history. Her personal responsibility, she soon realized, was to settle in her own mind and realize in her daily deeds a teacher's proper relationship with her class. "I would say that at first there was a conflict between the two . . . between our prejudices as human beings and our roles as teachers." She told me this after that conflict had really ceased to exist for herself.

Many Southern teachers, much like this one, have found their sentiments about desegregation changed by the simple yet enormously influential experience of teaching Negro children. Others have been persuaded to new attitudes toward colored children by the ugliness, the rank and stubborn meanness of some mobs of "adult" whites. A teacher in a harassed elementary school in New Orleans spoke angrily about the riots she had survived: "Who can ever forget the looks on those faces? I always thought I was a segregationist, but I never heard such language, and they became so impossible after a while that they belonged in a zoo, not on the streets. That little nigra child had more dignity than all of them put together . . . it makes you stop and think." She had gone through a sobering experience; the horror of her own beliefs gone wild had struck her.

Not all teachers feel able or willing to risk even the possibility of such contact with new customs. Some have disqualified themselves, knowing full well the strength of their segregationist feelings. A very few have had to be separated from desegregated classrooms, so very few as to be remarkable. Just as with white children, fervent or frantic segregationists among teachers are a small number compared to the majority who are more attached to a habit or a "way of life" than bound and propelled by a passion. There is a difference between these two kinds of people that is clinically recognizable and critically important in our nation's social and political life. School officials in most Southern cities have appreciated the likelihood of trouble if Negro children appeared in the classes of really fiery segregationist teachers. Many of these educators have learned the wisdom of preparatory conferences and discussions before the onset of desegregation and during its first months. Teachers can come together to talk about their experiences. They can hear the reasons for the sometimes elaborate rules and regulations required in

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**DILLARD'S PRE-FRESHMAN PROGRAM**

## “FOR SUCH A TIDE IS MOVING . . . ”

*Dillard University in New Orleans is an accredited coeducational undergraduate college with approximately 900 students who this year come from twenty-two states and six foreign countries. Dillard represents a merger of two older institutions, both founded in New Orleans in 1869, one by the Methodist Church, the other by the Congregational Church. While Dillard students are almost entirely Negro, the charter prohibits the University from discriminating on the basis of race, sex, or religion in the admission of students. Graduates of the University are readily accepted in better graduate and professional schools throughout the country. About one-third of the faculty is usually non-Negro. Dillard's Prefreshman Program is now a regular part of the freshman year and is being copied by other Southern colleges.*

By FRANK G. JENNINGS, *Education Consultant to the New World Foundation and an Editor-at-Large of Saturday Review.*

**I**N the last days of June, 1959, forty-four boys and girls, fresh from segregated high schools in eight of the states of the Deep South, came to the campus of Dillard University in New Orleans. Their tuition, room, and board had been paid. Under a grant from the Taconic Foundation, they were to participate in an experimental program that sought to discover whether or

not it was possible for them to develop what one of their instructors called “academic survival techniques.” These students were, like so many other graduates from the segregated public school systems of the South, poorly prepared to engage in college-level work. By any objective measure they could not read very well, and the group as a whole was generally insecure in the use of language. This is not to say that they were a uniquely disadvantaged group. The top half of the Prefreshman Group, as they were called, scored within the upper 15 per cent of all incoming students at Dillard. This, however, is merely an in-

dication of the difficulties that beset predominantly Negro colleges. They must somehow educate boys and girls who are sent to them from the inadequate, segregated high schools of the region.

A committee of the Dillard faculty had worked through the late winter and early spring to prepare a program for these students. It was decided that this was not to be a remedial program on the perfectly sensible grounds that not very much could be done in eight hot sticky summer weeks.

The emphasis was placed upon reading and good talk, not mere discussion,