

CHARITY AND JUSTICE

A Scenario

Let’s say it’s 1950 and there’s a problem in Virginia [or any other Southern state]. The problem is that a public school that only black children attend needs new history books. The books they have were published before World War II and are hopelessly out-of-date. But there’s no money to buy new books, because the schools that serve black students are seriously underfunded.

How can you deal with the problem? One way would be to respond with charity. Donors (both black and white) could contribute or raise funds to allow this school to buy newer books. In fact, sometimes that has happened in situations like this one.

But would that be the best response? It is, of course, good for students to get new (or newer) books. But giving the school new books only addresses the immediate problem. It doesn’t look at the cause of that problem.

What was the underlying cause of this problem in 1950? The public schools that were provided for children of color didn’t get enough money to buy new books while those schools for white students had new books. When we look beyond the immediate book shortage, we can see that the cause of the problem isn’t lack of money. That’s just a symptom. The problem is a system that favored one race over another (also known as racism). In 1950, the “separate-but-equal” doctrine said that it was acceptable for black children to go to schools separate from white children, as long as those schools were as good as the white kids’ schools. In reality, though, those schools were rarely as good as the white students’ schools.

Identifying racism as the root cause of the problem makes it possible to see another solution. That solution is to seek justice—to take action that would contribute to making a more equal education system. In other words, look beyond the textbook problem and look at how to change the underlying conditions that caused the textbook problem in the first place.

In the 1950s, court cases challenged the legality of separate-but-equal schools. In *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled that segregated schools were illegal and opened the door for black children to have access to the same education as white students.

Fill in the chart below to summarize the scenario you just read.

The Problem: Lack of Up-to-Date History Books

CHARITABLE SOLUTION	CAUSE OF THE PROBLEM	JUSTICE SOLUTION