

Cross-Cultural Understanding: Another Look

EDUCATORS, like most groups in American society, are subject to shifts of interest, now focusing on one set of problems and then on another. For some time now we have watched many American educators worship at the idol of "Math and Science." We have seen them carry the Twin Banners into the field of curriculum and swing them about with a zeal which has bordered on the fanatical. The Army of the Dedicated has been better equipped and better financed than almost any other single group in the history of American education, and its successes have been spectacular.

At many points the lines drawn by

tradition have been breached and the defending forces forced to leave the field. Many secondary schools have had to cut their social studies requirements from four years to three, or even two, and their English requirements from four years to three. The fine arts and vocational fields have long been on the run. Many elementary schools have cut back their social studies programs and have limited others. We see geometry and number theory accompanied by a wide variety of units based on the physical and biological sciences taught in the primary grades. We see honors seminars and other special programs in math and science being offered to the "brighter" students in the upper grades. These curricular successes have only revitalized the Army of the Dedicated, and they are now pressing their campaign with a new vigor.

There is, however, a new army appearing in the field. Its weapons are outmoded; its slogans warmed over, but its cause has a fresh and ringing appeal. At present this group resembles a bunch of stragglers following a bandwagon more than it does an army, but it is on the verge of becoming organized. Teachers all over the country have been watching this bandwagon and many have rushed out to join it. When this group does become organized it will be a powerful force on the curriculum field. Like any about-to-be-organized mob, it still is characterized by a great deal of confusion and lack of definite direction. It does, however, have a banner and but waits for a strong leadership to give this meaning. On this standard are emblazoned the words, "Cross-Cultural Understanding."

Many thoughtful teachers are attracted by this new standard. Most of us are deeply concerned about the kinds of

problems which face us today. Some of us are looking for quick, formula answers to problems of local, national and international scope and see the program for cross-cultural understanding as being immensely complex but so full of possibilities that we are willing to join the new movement so as to be able to explore these more fully. Before we jump on the bandwagon, and begin beating the drum and waving the banner, we must ask ourselves some searching questions. We will want our future commitments to be guided by our answers.

1. *What specific concerns lead us to recognize the need for new programs in cross-cultural education?*

This is perhaps the most fundamental, and yet the least asked, question in curricular planning. A clear analysis of our concerns is both prerequisite to, and the basis for, a precisely stated and defined goal. If we are not able to identify our concerns, it seems quite certain that we will not be able clearly to define our educational objectives.

If, for example, we are concerned with the problem of avoiding the dangers of war and of maintaining peace, we are likely to focus our attention on the military capacities of the people whom we perceive to be threatening to us, and upon their willingness to use this power. We would try to understand their culture in an effort to identify any possibilities for negotiation. We might, on the other hand, be concerned with the need to maintain good economic and social relationships with certain people believed to be important to our own well being. In this case, our educational program would probably seek an understanding of their cultural background as a basis for developing mutual cooperation. The nature of our concerns will

dictate the nature of our curriculum. Where the concerns are confused and undefined, the curriculum and its goals will also be confused and lacking in direction.

Recent events at home and abroad have resulted in a proliferation of programs designed to promote cross-cultural understanding. These programs vary from local classroom costume parties and pen-pal clubs to state-wide curricula detailing a whole series of year-long courses. In assessing any of the existing programs, or in planning new ones, we must always ask whether the program is founded on detailed, precise and explicit analysis of its underlying concerns, and whether the nature of these concerns is consistent with the nature of the goals and content of the program which they have engendered.

2. *What do we mean by cross-cultural understanding?*

Most of the available curriculum guides designed to promote a cross-cultural understanding have a conspicuous lack of any clear definition of the nature and purpose of the goal. Some curriculum guides interpret the goal as the possession of "basic" information; others interpret the goal as familiarity with some generalizations about behavior; a few consider the objective as a sort of generalized attitude, placing it in the realm of sentiment; many simply assert that the goal is desirable and without making any attempt at qualification, leave a *de facto* definition of cross-cultural understanding as whatever happens to the pupil as a result of his participation in class activities.

Just as a carpenter has difficulty in

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working without blueprints, the teacher has difficulty in working without a clearly defined set of objectives. Without a clear definition of the goal of cross-cultural understanding, all the fancy class activities become little more than curricular dithering—at best, busywork.

Successful implementation and evaluation of any program for cross-cultural understanding are directly related to the nature and quality of its operationally defined goals, goals which *must* be consistent with the concerns upon which they have been based. It would seem quite impossible to teach for cross-cultural understanding if we are unable to define what this means; it would seem equally impossible to evaluate for cross-cultural understanding if we have no notion of what it is we are looking for. Since few, if any, of the present programs for cross-cultural understanding are based on a clear definition of this goal, future efforts to create a definition should be free from the necessity of having to compromise with traditional concepts.

The question now arises as to what dimensions this new definition will take. Inasmuch as problems of cross-cultural understanding arise *wherever* there are cultural differences, it would seem most appropriate to focus on the development of a way of thinking about human behavior and its cultural determinants. Information about other ways of life does not necessarily lead to constructive and *mutually* satisfying relations between men of diverse cultural backgrounds. Such relations can only occur when the individuals involved have some understanding of their own and each others' values, beliefs, perceptions of reality, needs, fears, and premises for living. If the individual has a frame of reference which he can use as a basis

for analyzing and interpreting cultural differences, he should be able to develop broader and more satisfying relationships with people whether they come from culturally unique areas of his own community or whether they come from abroad. The same frame of reference should serve as a guide to understanding behavior whether it is at the individual or at the societal level. It is suggested here that future efforts to define operationally the goal of cross-cultural understanding should focus on the development of a frame of reference for thinking about human behavior and its cultural determinants and upon the development of a commitment to its use.

3. *What is the nature of present programs for cross-cultural understanding and how do they fit into the total curriculum?*

There is a good deal of educational activity going on under the name of cross-cultural understanding. Some of this activity is sporadic and lacking in direction, being undertaken at the whim of a local teacher who often regards it as a "change of pace," a kind of sugar coating on the pill of learning. Some of this activity is organized into programs offered as a regular part of the curriculum. These activities vary from occasional programs, assemblies, records, costume parties and the like to community-wide campaigns, pen-pal clubs and even adoption of families or whole schools. Usually, however, programs for cross-cultural understanding are simply embellished versions of the traditional offering.

In order to understand something of the nature of present programs and how they fit into the total curriculum, it is necessary to inquire into the liberal arts tradition. The liberal arts tradition is exceedingly strong in American educa-

tion. The great majority of American teachers probably identify with it. Within this tradition, knowledge is understood to mean *information about*. The educated citizen is defined as one who possesses a variety of information which he can bring to bear upon problems, questions and issues that arise.

As world problems have become increasingly acute and ever more related to individual actions, American teachers have expressed concern about the need for some kind of educational program that would develop a citizenry with a deeper understanding of the problems and differences between men and nations. This concern was quite naturally expressed in the kind of educational thinking which teachers best understood—the liberal arts tradition. It was felt that if we had more *knowledge about* other peoples and their ways of life, we would be better able to evolve mutually satisfying relationships with them. This meant improving the content of world history and geography, for these are the curricular areas most directly associated with the understanding of the world and its peoples, “modernizing” the teaching of foreign languages and including some comparative government. Where the concern was very high, culture studies were put into the curriculum and the whole supplemented by a variety of “special” activities. The traditional offerings remained at the center of the educational program and the “special” activities, though related to the goal, *more knowledge about* other peoples of the world, were, and are, incidental and peripheral to the central offerings. The strength of the liberal arts tradition is demonstrated by the fact that the bulk of the material prepared for teacher use in designing programs for the promotion of cross-cultural

understanding has been concerned with the improvement of the “special” activities rather than the development of an integrated curriculum. The UNESCO material, the New York City material, and most of the text material published to date have been of this type.

4. *How effective are our present programs?*

Since so few of the present programs have any clear organization or purpose, and since the term cross-cultural understanding is so often used as a euphemism for the traditional offerings, it is not possible to make any definitive statements about the effectiveness of these programs. Because the goal is undefined, about all that we can do here is make some general observations and hope that they will stimulate further thinking.

In questioning the effectiveness of any educational program, we are also questioning the effectiveness of the teachers who direct it. Certainly, the teacher who does not himself have a cross-cultural frame of reference cannot help his students to attain one. Because so many American teachers are ignorant of the behavioral sciences and of the application of their concepts to daily life, programs for cross-cultural understanding must indeed be limited.

Analysis of available curriculum guides and culture studies reveals the lack of a frame of reference for defining cross-cultural understanding and therefore a lack of a clear set of criteria for enunciating a program. Most of the studies and guides examined focus on the bizarre and the “different,” always asking *what* questions, never *why* questions. Material was evidently chosen on the basis of interest without asking whether the factors selected are of any vital significance to the people from

whose culture they were taken. The best of the studies attempt to teach some generalizations about human behavior which can be applied cross-culturally, but these generalizations are either so greatly oversimplified that they become untenable or are just not warranted by the data. In most cases these "generalizations" are simply reworkings of popular stereotypes and the pupils are asked to memorize. Programs which operate at the level of stereotypes can hardly be said to contribute to the development of cross-cultural understanding.

There is another dimension in which we might question the effectiveness of the present programs. The "special" activity, single-unit or single-course approach may very well be responsible for teaching some values which prohibit achievement of any genuine cross-cultural understanding. In the context of American culture, time, material and effort are all highly valued, and the rate of expenditure of any of these provides an important criterion for establishing the value of an activity. Programs for the development of cross-cultural understanding which are peripheral to the traditional curriculum demonstrate to the student that any one of these learnings that is not important enough to be integrated into the total curriculum certainly does not merit high investment of student interest and concern.

5. *Are there alternatives to present practices in teaching for cross-cultural understanding?*

There are *always* alternatives. The real question is, "What alternatives are we willing to consider?" If we are committed to the traditional curriculum and the concept of knowledge upon which it is based, our consideration of alternatives will focus on the means for acquir-

ing and organizing the essential information. If, on the other hand, we are willing to reexamine tradition critically, we are allowed a wide field in which to seek alternatives. We may ask whether there are other ways of defining knowledge than just possessing information and whether these ways might be more functional in terms of modern needs.

There is a growing body of evidence which indicates that the simple possession of knowledge does *not* change the pupil's attitudes nor does it change, necessarily, his approach to the analysis of problems. If this evidence is reliable, then present programs for cross-cultural understanding probably cannot hope to achieve this goal at any significant behavioral level. Evidently, if we want these programs to produce significant behavioral changes in students, we must analyze the desired behaviors and then teach specifically for them. This means, of course, that we must be able to define operationally the goal of cross-cultural understanding. It also means that the educational program must have practical as well as intellectual dimensions. It must offer the student a chance to test and implement his understanding.

What is needed is a shift in emphasis from *knowing that* people behave to *knowing how* and, perhaps, most important, *understanding why*. This would mean the development of a frame of reference that could be used in the analysis and interpretation of human behavior and its cultural determinants.

The culture study might very well play a central role in any effort to rework present programs. By redesigning the culture study and integrating a series of such studies into the total curriculum, we might be able to help students develop a more relativistic and analytic ap-

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professional with genuine respect for his associates and as one who has come to work cooperatively with them in finding solutions to their problems.

This analysis of the problems involved in giving professional advice abroad has direct application to those of us who work in a supervisory capacity here in the schools of the United States, whether we are classroom teachers, supervisors, consultants, principals or superintendents. In America, as abroad, cooperative endeavor which aims at the constructive solution of educational problems is facilitated when advisers have genuine respect for the work and for the importance of the people with whom they work.

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Another Look

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proach to the problems of living in a multi-cultured world. The culture study should be a depth analysis of a total way of life of a people, focusing not upon a superficial cataloging of food, clothing, shelter, and occupational types, but on the problem of understanding systems of needs, values and beliefs, and on how these are translated into patterns of behavior. The culture study would involve the student, both directly and indirectly, in the analysis and interpretation of cultural behavior. Through this analysis, it would lead him to a broader understanding of how culture determines behavior and provides him with specific opportunities to improve his analytic and interpretive skills. The

evidence seems to indicate that students will only develop these skills if given an opportunity to exercise and test them. The culture study can provide this opportunity by offering the student the chance to analyze ethnographic data and data which he himself gathers from the local community.

6. *Is it really possible to teach for cross-cultural understanding or are we just deluding ourselves?*

No matter how strong our personal commitments and desire to achieve a genuinely cross-cultural perspective, we must face the distinct possibility that such a goal is unlikely of attainment. Americans place very high value on success, hard work, technological advancement, thrift, cleanliness, time, and on a rather general concept of progress. This set of values is so strong that it provides the set of criteria against which we judge not only our own behavior, but also the behaviors of others. In attempting to realize these values, we have developed a society in which, judged by our own standards, we have attained a standard of living second to none. Any program designed to promote cross-cultural understanding must necessarily direct the students' attention to other peoples, their way of life, and their material culture. It is quite possible that this look at other cultures is accompanied by some inevitable comparisons between that culture and our own. If this is so, then it is very likely that what culture study does is to *reinforce* the student's emotional commitment to his own culture by demonstrating to him that it is, indeed, superior.

As educators, we are concerned about the problems of living in an interdependent world. What is needed is a shift from an information-centered to an analytic and behavior-centered approach.

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