SCHOOL systems, once again, are attempting to respond to community pressure, to those influences seen as disruptive. Because the educational boat is being rocked, a clear current objective of the school is to regain an even keel, institutionally speaking. After having weathered the storms of alleged poor teaching of reading, and of Sputnik, and of teaching the disadvantaged, it seems that emergency measures now must be used to develop socially relevant schools which can adequately demonstrate a high regard for cultural pluralism. Indeed we have unmasked to the point that the Acting Commissioner of Education of New York State speaks of the need to develop “battle plans.”

Although he was in that instance speaking about student unrest, the Commissioner’s words seem to imply a fine description of our other engagements.

If the concept of cultural pluralism is considered solely as an issue, we will be again engaged in the institutional ploy of containment. The question asked is, “How can we meet this new need without disrupting the overall operation?” Brickell suggested in 1961 that no major change had occurred in the schools of New York (and perhaps also of the nation), Sputnik notwithstanding.

Institutional containment, at least to that point, had been successful.

A New Social Order?

I introduce a discussion of cultural pluralism and self-identity in this manner because, quite clearly, this concept cannot be dealt with in the traditional style. Unless educational leaders are willing, indeed anxious, to depart from systems and traditions and shortsighted immediacy, any discussion of such a pressing topic is useless. Many years ago a powerful little book entitled Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order? was written, read, discussed, and forgotten. We are now dealing with all the issues that were presented by Counts in that volume.

This time we cannot gloss over the relationship between a dynamic society and an accountable school system. Nor can we escape by using the old slogan, “The school shall reflect the society.” Rather, we must use all of our knowledge and theory in an attempt to develop school structure and program that are truly appropriate to our decade.

Concern by educational leaders for the development of self-identity as a justifiable and realistic goal can be dealt with fairly quickly. The literature and research are strong enough to suggest, if not prove, a

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1 Quoted in the Albany Knickerbocker News, August 27, 1969.
direct link between a learner’s self-concept or self-identity and his academic achievement. It seems, moreover, that an even stronger argument for concern with self-identity exists. That is simply that it is here! Any teacher who faces a black child who will answer only to a Muslim name knows what I mean. Any high school principal who sees pupils in the halls of the school in dashikis or in natural haircuts knows what I mean. Any college person who has been faced with a decision about black studies programs knows what I mean.

Yet the struggle for self-identity or ethnic pride is not solely the property of our black brothers, though we need to be grateful to them for their leadership. I now hear a university professor of high station and national reputation expressing concern for the poor treatment of his fellow Italian-Americans in the history of our nation. I read with awe the demands of Mexican-Americans and note their self-reference as "brown." I receive a University memo describing a nascent program in Jewish studies, and I am delighted by the exhibit developed by the Canadian Indians at Expo in Montreal which has the message, “We have the right to restore and live our culture.”


Thrust for Self-Identity

We are, then, faced with the reality of a concentrated thrust for cultural self-identity and the recognition of this self-identity in the schools. This is not as simple as it may sound, however, because the recognition of a multi-culture nation demands a change in some basic values and some new learnings for all of America.

Despite our politico-philosophic statements about the beauty of diversity and the contributions of all Americans, a major concern of the schools for the past 100 years has been to eliminate differences. We, that is the schools, were a major instrument in “Americanizing” our people. We were the “pot” in which the “melting” took place. The teachers helped to eliminate the foreign accents; indeed, out of pure patriotism they taught Americanization classes at night. Our testimonials include such books as The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N.5

The textbooks used in the classrooms not only assumed the nonexistence of the black man, but also only the preexistence of the Semite, the Central European, the Spaniard.

It must be admitted, however, that all these efforts failed! As Nathan Glazer so well shows in *Beyond the Melting Pot*, we have always been a multi-culture country. Our children, after reading about all of us being alike, returned to live in Chinatown, Little Italy, Spanish Settlement, or Hog Bottom. Sons grew up, married in the faith or in the ethnic group, and settled down in the same part of town. Of course, it is true that some moved uptown or to the suburbs or to another state. But enough remained to maintain the ethnic and cultural identity of the community.

**Three Problems**

If we can but face this basic fact, that cultural diversity has always existed in the United States but that as a nation we have ignored it or denigrated it, perhaps we can move to engagement with some of the basic problems currently being raised. These problems are legion, but I would like to mention only three:

- **The threat of cultural diversity.** Cultural pluralism is regarded in many quarters as an intense threat. This is particularly true of those people who have most recently decided to leave the basic ethnic identity and to Americanize totally. People who are strivers or who have most recently cast off the separate culture quite understandably need a base line against which to measure their change. How can I know whether or not I have successfully passed from a subculture to the dominant culture if the totality is a series of subcultures? From the viewpoint of these people, assimilation or subjugation are the only options available.

Further, it would seem evident that striving is the national norm. It is almost un-American not to be trying to better oneself. And perceived interference with this self-improvement is quite often met with violence. We need but mention Cicero, Illinois, or the history of the labor movement to illustrate the issue.

- **Viability of cultural pluralism.** A second concern must be with the viability of the concept of cultural diversity. In fact, there is no model for such a national structure. I know of no evidence that indicates that a pluralistic society has ever existed or can exist. One thinks of such places as Hawaii or Israel or Quebec as examples of functioning communities with wide cultural divergence of inhabitants. Yet an examination reveals that each has a dominant culture with subservient subcultures and that each has considerable current agitation for recognition of the subcultures. Surely the sight of Catholics in Northern Ireland singing “We Shall Overcome” as they march on London-derry is a clear example of what I mean.

This is not to say that a culturally diverse nation cannot exist. The notion that it can is, however, at the present time based upon faith and not upon evidence.

- **Cultural supremacy.** Implied in the first two problems mentioned above is the very real concern for cultural equality as well as cultural diversity. To recognize that there are many cultures extant in the United States is not enough. It is too easy to say that we have many cultures, but mine is the best one, the superior one. (It would naturally be mine that is superior.) We must face cultural pluralism without placing the various people in a rank order and distributing emoluments in accordance with that order.

The three problems cited here—cultural threat, viability of cultural pluralism, and cultural supremacy—are problems that must be faced by educational leaders. The programmatic questions generated by these problems are serious and immediate. Such concerns as: How do we avoid all stereotypes? Should we stress similarities or differences? What cultures should be taught? By whom? Who shall make these decisions? are immediate.

I wonder, as did Professor Counts, do the schools dare to build a new social order? Or will they sit by as the old one crumbles?