

Cultural Pluralism: Its Implications for Education

THOMAS C. HOGG *
MARLIN R. McCOMB

Sometimes we protect ourselves by ostracizing that different, sometimes by coercing, indenturing or enslaving it, sometimes by liquidating it. Always we would, if we could, digest it culturally as we digest vegetables and animals biologically.—Horace Kallen

CULTURAL pluralism has been a dominant feature in man's very recent history; and, yet, there has been a general failure to consider its meaning and to examine its implications for American culture in general and the field of education in particular. The persistence of antecedent cultural traditions and successive migrations of vast numbers of people accounts, in very large measure, for the present cultural pluralism existing in the United States and specific settings therein.

The processes of cultural survival and migration contribute to a diverse and conflictive sociocultural condition to which all institutions, including schools, must adapt. Today, the very spatial and social mobility of populations, both in terms of their urban concentration around the city core and their subsequent flight and extension to the city's more rural environs, has created many new problems for the schools and the educational process.

American Cultural Pluralism and Education

As a society, America has come to enshrine education with the idealism, hope, and missionary qualities that characterize other

American systems and the value system as a whole (Curti, 1960). Equally, and typically, there is a growing recognition that the professions of idealism do *not* match the practices of reality for *many*, including children, in our society.

America's educational system has long been held up as a model, free and open to children from all social and economic levels, all religious and cultural backgrounds. Also, the educational system has been pointed to with pride by those who see it as an enculturation mechanism whereby such diverse backgrounds would be changed so that individuals might be made culturally capable and able to function in American society and would be offered through education an invaluable means for self-realization and social mobility. Looking beyond the enculturation, social mobility, and self-realization processes, the school has been pictured as a force for social change—a source of innovation and a laboratory for bold experimentation (cf. Cremin, 1961).

In fact, however, the end product of the educational process has now been recognized by educators and public alike to be something less for those children who came from different cultural backgrounds (Hickerson, 1966; *Report of the National Commis-*

* Thomas C. Hogg, Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, Oregon State University, Corvallis; and Marlin R. McComb, Instructor, Department of Sociology, Baylor University, Waco, Texas

sion on Civil Disorders, 1968; Clark, 1965; and Conant, 1964). For the poor black, Indian, Puerto Rican, Mexican-American, or white child, the American educational process has been inadequate, and it has systematically devaluated and attempted to destroy their cultural uniqueness. This educational inadequacy has been assaulted through massive public expenditures to accelerate the process of "better" education, but in its train has also come cultural devaluation.

Deviations from the posited cultural norm have been labeled as manifestations of "cultural deprivation or [of being] disadvantaged" in the educational world (cf. Riessman, 1962). Exemplars of such diversity in America have been poked at, probed, and diagnosed *ad infinitum* by a bewildered educational profession, utilizing a string of euphemisms that change as the problems they fail to conceptualize remain. For too long the educational profession has been content to place the blame on the culturally different for failing to be compatible with and malleable to the school environment. Perhaps even more important is the implication that the culturally different offer an appearance, in poverty and lifeway, of what America should not be—culturally heterogeneous and socially disintegrated.

Such cultural examples are seen as being different, but it has been held that they can and should be made the same, that they, too, can become a part of the American mainstream and melting pot. How to bring this state into being was the difficult question that plagued past American educators, and it continues to vex us in our time.

The fundamental premises of assimilationist approaches to education have seldom been seriously questioned, even though many of the sources of our past and present assimilation dilemmas appear to stem from two fundamental fallacies about the American social and cultural situation. First, is the notion that there is occurring and has occurred a proper melting-pot effect in assimilating the culturally different; and second, is the notion that American society *should be*, and therefore *is*, a homogeneous cultural system. It is becoming more apparent in

other cultures around the world that there exists a wide range of pluralistic structures and cultures (Hogg, 1965; Mitchell, 1960; P. M. Hauser, 1961). The same appears to hold for the United States, a culture often held to be a prime example of the "melting pot" thesis. Even here, contrary to many existing beliefs, assimilation has been more myth than fact (Kiser, 1949). It appears that only now, after we have come to recognize cultural diversity within other nations of the world, not only in Africa (Mayer, 1962) and Asia (Burling, 1965), but in Europe as well, have we dared to apply realistic frameworks to the American cultural milieu.

Indeed, pluralism in America stems from earliest colonial days (Crevecoeur, 1962), appears again in the debates and compromises surrounding the Constitution, and is associated with the cultural separatist features of the Westward Movement. It also looms large in the causes of the Civil War, multiplies due to urban-industrialism, European immigration, and internal migrations by Afro-Americans, accelerates during World War I, the Depression, and World War II as mobile Americans discover new cultures at home and abroad.

In more recent years, the demand for "Black Power," "Red Power," and other additional evidences of a new cultural awareness on the part of many American cultural categories are becoming more manifest for all Americans to see (cf. Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967; and Steiner, 1968). Many of these manifestations are part and parcel of the urban crisis, the context for which is cultural pluralism and social non-articulation. Similarly, even now we are slowly coming to recognize, contrary to the ideas expressed in literature but a decade or two ago, that the small towns of rural America are not, and probably never were, as homogeneous as we thought (cf. Vidich and Bensman, 1960).

Our own recent researches in Sweet Home, Oregon, for example, have revealed the survivals of antecedent traditions as well as a situation of cultural conflict for small and rural settings. Nestled as it is in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains of western

Oregon, Sweet Home has served as the base for bands of hunting and gathering Indians, early settlers seeking escape from religious discrimination, robust loggers or "timber beasts" exploiting the forest by brawn and individual ability, the modern logging and milling industries, and now, water reservoirs promising recreation and new abundance. This local setting has gone through a series of adaptive stages as new immigrants and new modes of subsistence, both carrying distinctive forms of human organization and world view, have replaced the old. Though largely superseded, early stages of Euro-American cultural adaptation continue to be manifest in Sweet Home, not only in terms of values and norms, but also in terms of behavioral patterns.

We have found that the multiple orientations of townsmen toward schools and government are more, much more than a stubborn adherence to conservatism. Their views constitute values which have served well in other cultural challenges, values to which others, those lacking that experience and socialized in still other idioms of thought, behavior, and things, cannot relate. It is in this persisting conflict situation that institutions try to maintain themselves, and yet it is also the type-situation which most severely threatens the existence of institutions, particularly those designed to accomplish basic social processes like education.

In Sweet Home, as in America more generally, the fundamental question appears to be, education for what? To what value system, to what form of cultural adaptation does an educational system structure itself when no clear trends of cultural substitution are apparent, when many cultures are manifest, and when a setting still possesses an ecology which permits a number of technical, social, and ideological choices? More critically, can our schools survive the game of cultural roulette? Which tradition is to be given educational legitimacy? Which bearers of what culture are to be ignored and therefore destroyed?

Cultural pluralism and its attendant conflicts in America are increasing under the impact of industry; pluralism plus con-

flikt appear to be part of the new quality of industrial, social, and cultural life. Thus, a condition which in eras only recently past was viewed as a strain in the social system now appears to be the system. The new adaptation is not a matter of choosing one of many cultures, it is to succeed with many cultures.

Cultural Adaptations for Education

It is our view, then, that the school in the American setting, and the educational process more generally, must adapt to cultural conditions. Given the existence of varying cultural traditions, and assuming that a setting's institutions are formal and enduring manifestations of local culture, then the school and the educational process must formally adjust to extant pluralism, if they are to retain their institutional character. Moreover, not only must education itself adapt to cultural pluralism, it must educate the young for cultural pluralism. This latter task necessarily involves revision of not only educational technology and organization, but the ideology as well.

In this process of change the following considerations must be given due weight. First, in cultural terms, the school must provide each student with a set of relevant cultural experiences so that successful and meaningful cultural adaptations might be made. In accomplishing this task, it must work within and tolerate multiple ranges of interaction and ideology, providing reasons for expression of and respect for distinctive behaviors and thoughts. Basic to the task is the necessity for the school to go through the process of a fundamental redefinition and redirection of assumptions presently made about our society, the purpose of the school, and the school's organization and external relationships in culturally pluralistic settings.

Failing this, the school is encouraging the range of social problems afflicting all culturally different youth—dropping out of school, unemployment, deteriorated self-image, hostility toward authority, and withdrawal from social involvement. Moreover, by a failure to recognize cultural pluralism,

the school discourages innovation and syncretism of conflictive cultural elements, thereby increasing conflict and public apathy. What education has done to the American Indian, it is also doing to those of a different culture not recognized through skin color and tongue.

Second, in educational terms, through a premise of individual "cultural worth" the school must establish means for cultural expression in the widest variety of school contexts—classrooms, assemblies, clubs, and curricula. This could mean a revision of curriculum including redirection of language and other art programs as well as technical expression (rather than training) programs, an expansion of the technical concept beyond training simply for placement in economic technology. Such means as these require special training and recruitment of teachers and administrators and their sensitization to cultural pluralism. In order to ensure its community future, the school must maintain constant contact with community members in family and organizational contexts. This means cooperation with and study of other private and public agencies. Through consciously sought "cultural feedback" the school must restructure its organization and activities and attempt to become a center of community interaction.

Finally, the school must go beyond just becoming a reflection of cultural diversity. It must participate in, and prepare youth for, a culturally pluralistic life and society; and such an educational strategy must become a major and clearly articulated set of goals in the educational process. The extent to which these challenges can be met in culturally pluralistic settings depends ultimately upon the extent to which the school is sensitized to cultural differences within the setting. So long as cultural pluralism is a factor, the school's role must be to educate itself.

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