



Materials for Multi-Ethnic Learners

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ENLIGHTENED educators recognize that our educational system has failed in a most fundamental way to provide a relevant education for black and other ethnic groups. Many will agree that the root cause of this failure is racism, the type of racism, conscious or unconscious, which dictates the choice of curriculum materials and the way these are presented. Few understand, however, the basic disagreement on educational issues that revolves around the differences in what is important and critical for black, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Indian, Oriental, and various other ethnic groups.

Those of us who have grown up as the products of minority groups have been provided with a set of experiences that are different than those of the vast majority of Americans. It is these experiences that determine which events we perceive as unimportant, as important, and as critical. If one were able to look at these differential experiences over time, then one could clearly discern a pattern, a rhythm of events which may be different in the black community, for example, than the accumulation of important events in the white community.

Since various ethnic groups have a different reality, it is important to understand that, for the times in which we live, their priorities refer to a different ordering system with different imperatives for the future.

Therefore, in order to consider relevant curriculum materials for multi-ethnic learners in a technological age, the topic must be viewed from the perspective of those ethnic groups involved.

Interest in securing relevant curriculum materials has increased considerably in the recent past. Today when widespread social and technological changes are taking place in our lives, whether we like it or not, and when still other changes seem necessary to preserve us from disaster, understanding of what is relevant to our society seems particularly important. In spite of the current interest, however, and the efforts of theorists in the past to devise a curriculum that would teach individuals how to control their surroundings rather than submit to them, we have never really had a curriculum that adequately reflected the multi-ethnic nature of our society.

Although the topic of relevant materials is not exactly a new development, we are at least beginning to recognize that technology coupled with a social revolution, as evidenced by the increased demands for relevance on the part of ethnic groups, is evolving as part of an effort to achieve order and direction in the teeth of accelerating changes. Nowhere

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has this been pointed out more vividly than in the case of Black Studies. Even the future is no longer remote. As John Pfeiffer put it,

Education as a way, the way ultimately, to a better world—as a force against poverty, ill health, and crime,—is less a utopian idea than it was a generation ago.¹

Yesterday's possibilities are today's programs because we really have no choice. We used to be able to get away with planning for long-run possibilities by saying that things will be better. These days, however, blacks, and various other ethnic groups, refuse to wait that long.

A Change of Emphasis

When we raise the question as to the kind of young citizens we want to nurture in our school system today, we must do it in view of both a technological and a pluralistic society and with the knowledge that various ethnic groups are demanding that they participate in the process of determining what education should be and do.

Considering the negative results of racism and prejudice and the conflict that exists in the lives of learners who come from minority groups, what change of emphasis in securing curriculum materials is advisable to meet the current situation? Moreover, recognizing the demands that diverse ethnic groups in America make upon their members and the imperative need for some sort of national unity of a democratic kind, what is a relevant education?

There are two ways of looking at these related questions. From the viewpoint of the multi-ethnic learner, we need to determine what we mean by *relevance*. In education, the term implies that what is to be learned is perceived by the learner as having meaning in his present life and the expectation that it will have utility in future learning or coping situations. A meaningful relevant education, therefore, includes the skills necessary for one to cope with life. Moreover, this kind of education focuses on content that deals with

specific ethnic group experiences in contemporary society and, therefore, with the problems of everyday existence.

This definition provides us with a basis for selecting the kinds of materials that will help children to cope with life the way it actually exists. To be sure, the multi-ethnic learner needs to know about his past and he needs to learn basic skills; but he should also know very early in his education precisely what it is he is going to have to face in everyday living. The implications of this principle in the selection of relevant curriculum material are deeply incisive and ought to be taken seriously by educators.

A change of emphasis needs also to be considered from the viewpoint of the ethnic diversity of the American people. Persons do not live as footloose individuals; they carry on as members of functional groups playing significant roles in society. Are there not, therefore, two foci of civic interest to be kept clearly in mind in the selection of multi-ethnic materials?

Persons have responsibilities to the self-cultures in which they live and move and have their beings, and at the same time they pay allegiance to an America which ethnically speaking is in the process of becoming a culture of cultures. It would be a mistake to disregard either of these orientations and loyalties in the education of youth.

Materials Must Be Functional

Without question, one of the most significant developments in education in the past decade in America has been the demand by black Americans for a more relevant curriculum and thus more relevant curriculum materials. These demands have altered irreversibly the images of what being black in America means and have pointed up the ironic ways in which our educational institution has compounded the myth that ours has been an open society.

The sense of black unity, pride, and destiny unleashed in the past half-decade carries with it both the threat and the promise of a new society potentially open for the first time. To single out the black here is not to

¹ John Pfeiffer, *New Look at Education*. Poughkeepsie, New York: Odyssey Press, 1968. p. 78.

ignore other ethnic groups in our society which have been in the past and remain today outcasts in one form or another. To focus on the black is rather to acknowledge what has been insisted upon and that, as a result, others excluded by our society are becoming more visible, among them American Indians, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans.

When one speculates upon the educational implications of social and technological developments in terms of a change of emphasis in the selection of curriculum materials, the possibilities are myriad. Nonetheless, at least two suggestions can be made in the identification and securing of relevant materials. First, relevant curriculum materials for multi-ethnic learners must be functional. Materials used by teachers ought to serve three related functions as follows: (a) develop basic skills, (b) reflect the ethnicity of the learner, and (c) develop an appreciation for the humanities (art, drama, and music).

Although the purpose here is not to identify specific items, *Stevie*,² by artist John Steptoe, is a good example of a functional book. *Stevie* is a realistic story about black children by a young black author. It is directed at black children, for the author intended it to relate to what a black child would know. As such, it not only reflects the ethnicity of a particular group of learners but it also provides motivation to read. Of equal importance are the illustrations, which are full color paintings by the author. Mr. Steptoe has made his paintings functional by bringing them to the pages of a reader where black children, who may never visit a museum, can relate to them and perhaps begin to develop an appreciation of art.

There are, of course, other books and materials too numerous to mention here that attempt to do the same thing with other groups. The point is that this author was well aware of the social developments of the day and the need to express in a functional way an art form. Thus he was able to provide a book that is relevant in terms of its meaning and utility for black children.

Multi-Ethnic Learners and Technology

A second suggestion is that those who have the task of identifying relevant materials for multi-ethnic learners must recognize that our schools exist in a technological culture. Parallel to the change of emphasis caused by the social revolutions of our day is the explosion of knowledge which stems from the technological strides of men. Since our schools exist in a technological age, it is difficult to see how they will be able to resist the invasion of machines.

For several reasons increased technology may be advantageous to the multi-ethnic learner. First, the use of machines and other devices offers the same kind of advantages to the schools that it offers business or industry. Their use offers labor saving devices that frequently increase productivity, efficiency, and quality; and these are the very improvements that are being demanded in our schools.

More and more schools are experimenting with various technological approaches. In Ossining, New York, a public school in a low-income neighborhood has guaranteed parents of incoming kindergarten children that by next June, 98 percent of the children will be reading at a nationwide average level. The program stresses individualized instruction and relies heavily on instruments such as filmstrips, the tape recorder, and an audio flash card reader.

It has already been demonstrated in a variety of places, including New York City and Cleveland, that TV can be a most valuable tool in teaching multi-ethnic learners, particularly those who come from the inner city. The content of most of these programs is based on the conditions and on the lives of the learners whom the teachers are trying to reach. Channel 13 WNDT in New York City has, for example, an entire curriculum in Black Studies, which includes African Anthropology and history of the Negro people.

In New York City a recent study was made of computer-assisted instruction (CAI) in 16 experimental schools involving 6,000 students. This study concluded systemat-

² John Steptoe, *Stevie*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969.

ically in nearly all groups that CAI students made greater gains in arithmetic achievement as measured by the Metropolitan Achievement Tests than did the non-CAI students with whom they were compared. Since many schools in the inner city have great deficiencies in math and science areas, these results offer some hope for the future.

Obviously any introduction of technology demands more of a teacher in terms of education experiences and professional growth. Teachers will have to understand much more about learning theory and communication. And they will have to exercise sound judgment in terms of determining which educational goals can be reached through instructional technology and which can be reached by other methods.

Suggestions for the selection of relevant curriculum materials for multi-ethnic learners in a technological society presented in this

article represent only an overview of a subject that is both old and new. The impact of a variety of social developments and technological advances in the face of accelerating changes has been stressed. While education has made tremendous progress in the past few years, we are, it seems, just at the beginning of a new era. In our present education system everything points toward increased emphasis on the everyday lives and living of multi-ethnic learners and the acquisition of knowledge through technology.

Yet we know too well that knowledge, if it cannot be used by a free mind, will neither be of benefit to the individual nor will it be of help to society. Surely at this point in time we have learned that democracy is based on differences rather than sameness. Only upon the acceptance of differences can we grow toward an awareness of the value of cultural diversity in a society which is only beginning to realize that it is pluralistic. □

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