

---

# *Needed: Ethnic Studies in Schools*

---

**GENEVA GAY \***

**A** MAJOR concern in the current reevaluation of American education is how to provide a high quality of education for minority youth. Members of ethnic minorities have attacked traditional educational policy designed to perpetuate only one cultural heritage as being inherently ethnocentric, unjust, and unrealistic in a culturally pluralistic setting. Demands are being made for opportunities for learning experiences and for programs which are designed specifically for, are sensitive to, and are designed to reflect the needs, attitudes, and the cultural conditioning particularly of Blacks, Mexican Americans, Indians, and Puerto Ricans. Many school systems have responded to these demands by instituting "minority studies programs" in various forms and degrees, from integrating American history courses to creating completely separate departments. Yet, most such programs seem designed to be introduced in the curriculum via social studies and literature courses of study.

These minority studies programs are too often taken at face value. They are assumed to be ethnic studies simply because more information about Blacks, Mexican Americans, Indians, and other minority groups is beginning to appear in school curricula. Yet, most of these programs are hastily organized, based upon a mistaken belief that historical facts constitute ethnic

studies, and likely were motivated by desires to improve academic performances of minority students. In some ways such programs are similar to their forerunner, compensatory education.

The concept of cultural deprivation which laid the philosophical foundation of compensatory education proclaimed that the ghetto child's academic failures resulted from his cognitive limitations, his deprived background, and his stunted personal, social, and cultural development. It was believed that these deficiencies could be corrected and the child's readiness for formal education accelerated by providing compensatory stimulation.

The result was numerous programs of reading readiness, guidance counseling, and culturally enriching experiences (including field trips, concerts, and visitors).

## **Minority Studies**

The current emphasis in minority studies has shifted somewhat. More attention seems given now to the child's perceptions of himself and to how these affect his relations in and adaptations to society. Nega-

\* Geneva Gay, Teaching Associate, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, The University of Texas at Austin

tive self-concepts and identity crises are considered major obstacles to successful academic performance. To correct these problems, schools have launched programs designed to help minority students find out more about their own cultural heritages. Most of these programs fall into the category of "minority studies" such as Black studies, Afro-American studies, Mexican American studies, and Latin American studies.

Social studies and literature courses of study are especially susceptible to revision to accommodate the new trends. It is much easier to add names of Negroes to the list of heroes studied in American history than it is to introduce courses which capture the essence of minority cultures. This maneuver to "integrate" the study of ethnic groups into the existing curriculum structures appears to be the preferred technique because it comes closer to approximating the ideal of unanimity or the melting pot myth among American people than does any other. This explains the current emphasis on selecting textbooks and courses of study which are integrated and well balanced in their treatment of different ethnic groups, rather than treating them as separate cultural entities. Unquestionably these changes are needed to update curricula. However, they do not constitute ethnic studies, nor are they enough to meet the educational needs of minority students.

Minority studies, irrespective of how numerous, will continue to be incapable of meeting the needs of minority youth as long as traditional educational philosophy and policies remain essentially the same. Presumably American education is designed for the perpetuation and transmission of cultural heritage and to give students the tools with which to facilitate their participation in society. Nevertheless, education largely has had the reverse effect on minority people and their culture.

In a sense, the emphasis on one system of education for all has caused a kind of cultural genocide and has made minority students feel alienated and isolated in middle class schools. It has ignored both the treatment of their culture in courses of study and

the perspective from which they view education. Black life styles, for example, have been considered as merely inadequate and mal-adjusted manifestations of middle class norms. Black students have been taught to question the worthiness of their social life patterns and to dismiss their training and experiences prior to entering school as a conglomeration of deviances and deficiencies.

### **Authentic Programs**

Schools have operated on the premise that the influences of these students' preschool and social *miseducation* had to be eradicated before they could proceed with classroom activities with any degree of success. Such attitudes have been communicated to students in numerous ways. Curriculum materials have treated minorities very stereotypically. Authentic information has been distorted, ignored, and/or omitted. Myths, prejudices, and stereotypes have been perpetuated through school programs. Even the few Blacks who "made" the history books were treated either as an afterthought or in a condescending manner.

These attitudes are so firmly entrenched in the educational system that they are extremely difficult to change. Yet, educators seem all too unaware of the effects these attitudes have had and continue to have on minority students. They are quick to believe that change can be effected and positive self-concepts developed merely by integrating American history and literature. They seem to feel that if Black students are given a few more Black heroes to emulate, their identity crises will be solved, they will develop pride in themselves and their culture, they will achieve higher levels of academic success, and they will be able to function more effectively in society. Having thus instituted minority studies, educational systems applaud themselves and receive plaudits from a variety of groups for having gallantly risen to the challenge of what to do about the education of minority students. Yet, Negro history is not enough to meet the needs of Black students. Nor are Mexican American studies adequate for Chicano students. Needed is the

***"...so brilliantly defined and so obviously vital to survival that I sat in awe and alarm."***

This was one critic's reaction to the message of "Multiply . . . and Subdue the Earth," the NET documentary which underscores the question: Can humanity survive on this planet? Guided by ecologist Ian McHarg, the film reveals a frightening panorama of mindless abuse in our environment—a pattern which may well lead to the destruction of our natural resources if it is not checked.

*Catalog Synopsis*

**MULTIPLY . . . AND SUBDUED THE EARTH**

16mm/67 min./b&w/sale \$270/rental \$13.00  
color/sale \$450/rental \$18.50

Our cities are over-crowded, much of the air we breathe is polluted, and the source of our future supply of food and water is in danger. These are problems caused, in part, by unplanned use of our natural environment. Suburban developments are being built with little regard for the natural life surrounding them. One study has revealed that eighty-two per cent of midtown Manhattan's population have been found to exhibit various degrees of mental illness which is thought to be partially caused by overcrowding. The central message of this film, as stated by Ian McHarg, is that man must use ecological planning and seek not a conquest of nature but unity with nature.

Produced by National Educational Television

**PREVIEW:** Preview prints are available to prospective buyers at no cost other than return postage. Send purchase orders and preview requests to the Indiana University Audio-Visual Center, Bloomington, Indiana 47401.

**RENTAL:** Prints may be rented from your nearest film rental library or send orders to the Indiana University Audio-Visual Center, Bloomington, Indiana 47401.

**CCTV:** This film may be used in closed-circuit television systems through a licensing agreement with the Audio-Visual Center. For a detailed statement of the electronic distribution plan, write to the Indiana University Audio-Visual Center.

institution of authentic and comprehensive programs of ethnic studies in schools.

Granted, revision of history courses to reflect the true role of minority citizens in the development of American culture is a step in the right direction. Yet at best it is only a teetering step. Black and other minority studies programs are a beginning, but there is still a great deal more to be done before education can be said to have been made relevant to minority youth. One answer to the dilemma is asserted to be ethnic studies. Unfortunately, minority studies have been mistakenly perceived to be ethnic studies. Black studies and Negro history do not of themselves constitute ethnic studies. The concept of ethnic studies is much more complex than the assumptions underlying minority studies.

### **A New Perspective**

Ethnic studies, as suggested here, would begin with the development of a new perspective from which to approach the process of teaching minority students. Attitude changes are as important to its implementation as new content, if not more so. To be realistic and successful, ethnic studies will be fully cognizant of and sensitive to all the ramifications of what it is like for a people to exist in a perceived oppressive society, the mechanisms which have evolved to facilitate adaptation and survival, and the culture that has resulted from these experiences. The programs must rely heavily upon the theories and methodology of the behavioral sciences, especially social psychology, sociology, and anthropology, and use their techniques in the pedagogic processes. They must capture the essence of the culture of the particular ethnic group for which they are designed.

This means that *one* ethnic studies program will not suffice. It is impossible to create a single program to serve all minorities. This is one of the major weaknesses of the current minority studies—that is, the belief that the same Black studies programs can serve both black and white students equally well. Consequently, there must be as many ethnic studies programs as there are

ethnic groups. This innovation must be perceived as more than a series of culture-bound courses. It must also, and most important, include the frames of reference, the philosophical outlooks, and the methodologies with which the teaching of minority students is approached.

These programs must operate from the position of a Black, a Mexican American, a Puerto Rican, or other specific frame of reference, approaching *his* education through *his* outlook and world view, and reflecting the understanding of why and how *he* has been conditioned to function as he does. Integrated American history simply cannot do this. Nor can minority studies as presently conceived. Knowing that a Benjamin Banneker or a Charles Drew was a famous *Black* man will not help a Black ghetto student survive in today's world. Simply knowing these facts is not any guarantee that he will be proud of being Black or know who he is after he learns these little tidbits.

Before the child learns, he must be able to identify with the situations and see some possibilities for transference or application of the knowledge to his daily life. To create this atmosphere, the child's background experiences and cultural heritage must become the structural framework and the unifying forces which give order, purpose, and direction to the educational activities designed for minority youth. Once these attitudinal and philosophical changes have taken place within school policies and personnel, educators can begin to talk in realistic terms about improving the education of ethnic minorities. Until then, we will continue deluding ourselves into believing a high quality of education is possible *vis-à-vis* minority studies while, at best, these innovations are only temporary, stop-gap maneuvers used to relieve the intense pressures of criticisms leveled against contemporary educational systems.

### A Promising Medium

Ethnic studies are a promising medium through which to achieve the self-actualization of minority students. They promise the

most feasible means by which school experiences and social realities may be related in close harmony. They can provide a continuity and a logical progression in place of what is now fragmented, uncoordinated segments of education. Particular subjects of courses of study become only incidental tools to be used for the application of concepts. In reality, subjects probably count for less than the perspective with which the teaching of those subjects is approached.

The essence of ethnic studies is the creation and utilization of cultural context teaching and culturally bound learning experiences. Once this procedure has been established there no longer will be any question of lack of academic motivation, alienated and disenchanting youth, or irrelevant education.

Students should be interested and achieve more academically. Ethnic studies should allow students the opportunity to be actively and intimately involved in their learning experiences and for education to encompass and build on the strengths of their entire life styles.

The need for new conceptualization of ethnic studies seems overdue. Minority studies programs may have transient merits within themselves, but they fall far short of doing what needs to be done in order to make education a meaningful enterprise for minority students. They are terminal because they fail to consider an essential factor necessary for the maturation and personal and intellectual development of any child—his cultural conditioning as an organized, systematic structure of values, beliefs, norms, customs, and traditions which influence his every response to social stimuli. An important answer to the dilemma of how to educate minority students is through ethnic studies. This seems to be the only alternative which conceivably can foster the development of functional citizenship, pride in self and culture, and self-actualization.

The need for a high quality of education for minority students is so crucial that ethnic studies should receive top priority in any consideration of educational needs and curriculum innovations. □

Copyright © 1970 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.