



Relevance in Instructional Materials

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DO INSTRUCTIONAL materials produced today reflect the American pluralistic society? Today's students are keenly aware of people and are sensitive to prejudice and stereotypes. They recognize the use of offensive materials and blatant omissions of meaningful material. Regardless of their economic or geographic background, students are "hip" to the omissions and prejudices of the media used in today's public schools.

School systems and institutions of higher learning are becoming concerned about the relevancy of educational materials which are designed for a white, middle class society. All youngsters need to be imbued with a healthy self-concept—a feeling of personal value and self-acceptance—in order to function as responsible and contributing members of American society. Instructional materials can provide a model in developing healthy concepts of self and others.

Miller¹ observes that enlightened educators recognize that our educational system has failed to provide a relevant education for black and other ethnic groups. He feels that in order to consider relevant curriculum materials for multiethnic learners in a technological age, the topic must be viewed from the perspective of those ethnic groups in-

¹ LaMar P. Miller. "Materials for Multi-Ethnic Learners." *Educational Leadership* 28 (2): 129-32; November 1970.

involved—the Black, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Indian, and Oriental perspective.

To acknowledge the potential of educational materials for making a positive contribution to intergroup attitudes is also to acknowledge their equally potent capacity for affecting attitudes negatively. The American culture's past record of ineptitude and bias in dealing with minority group images makes it crucially important to determine what kinds of images curriculum materials are projecting.

Fostering Pluralism

In a recent study conducted by Beatrice Clark-Jones² to appraise the treatment of black Americans in selected elementary school social studies filmstrips, it was found that filmstrips were rated as fostering pluralism when they contained frames with black Americans in central as well as peripheral character roles.

² Beatrice Jones. "An Appraisal of the Treatment of Black Americans in Selected Elementary School Social Studies Filmstrips." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University, 1971.

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Whereas the actual number of filmstrips fostering the concept of pluralism was greater between 1960-1969 than in the past, the percentage of filmstrips not fostering pluralism was higher within this decade, also. There was a positive correlation between the number of frames with black Americans in filmstrips and those fostering pluralism. When blacks were portrayed in only manual and service-type occupations, the filmstrips were not rated as effective in fostering pluralism. This negative rating was also found when blacks were continuously illustrated alone or with other blacks.

The importance of these findings has been underscored by Price and Spencer,³ who point out that realistic and accurate portrayal and analysis of the pluralistic nature of society, its achievements, and the problems it faces today are imperative at this critical moment in the history of our nation.

As filmstrips and other visuals used in the classroom are developed to supplement the teacher's information, they need to illustrate the *real* world. Particularly in the inner city schools, where a multiethnic class composition is a given, the students will learn more readily where the events are portrayed in a realistic multicultural setting. Present-day students find it easy to "turn off" the unreal situations in many filmstrips.

Jones also found that most of the filmstrips did not reflect the producer's sensitivity to stereotypes in presenting illustrations of black Americans. This was revealed through the limited number of illustrations designed to produce positive images of black Americans in the filmstrips. When blacks were illustrated in more than one section of a filmstrip, it was more likely to foster the concept of pluralism.

However, in Jones' sample of 40 filmstrips, only six were rated as fostering pluralism. Surely, in 1971, social studies filmstrips could illustrate black Americans in roles other than the stereotype field hands picking cotton on Southern plantations!

³ Robert D. Price and Thelma L. Spencer. "Elementary Social Studies Textbooks and Their Relevance to the Negro Child." *The Social Studies* 61 (4): 168-73; April 1970.

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Family unit situations with the adult black male were seldom illustrated. Black American children or adults were rarely presented in leadership positions. Children or adults were not usually presented in roles similar to those portrayed by Caucasians.

To develop an understanding of the pluralistic nature of the American society and the varying family forms within it, all students need to be exposed to illustrations of the gamut of racial and family components. Nuclear family units exist at all levels of society and within all racial groups. Variations from the nuclear family are not a monopoly of the black . . . or the poor. An appreciation of the diversity of American society should be the goal of the social studies programs.

Life Style Portrayal

In the inner cities, teachers in many subject matter areas face a vacuum of materials which illustrate concepts, ideas, or problems in a life style portrayal with which their students can identify.

Jones' research shows that illustrations conveying the uniqueness and worth of black Americans were rarely seen in the filmstrips analyzed. Because the majority of the filmstrips portray only one race (Caucasian), viewers are likely to infer that other races are less capable or less important. It has been observed that many minority youths, as a function of their own personal experiences and historical information, develop low levels of aspiration regarding their potential achievement in American life.⁴

The American child, if exposed to all types and classes of minority groups, with

⁴ Robert L. Green and Richard Thomas. "Racism and Attitude Change: The Role of Mass Media and Instructional Technology." Washington, D.C.: Commission on Instructional Technology, 1970. (Monograph.)

illustrations depicting the diversity of racial traits, will have examples of the pluralistic nature of society. The plea for pluralistic education is not a special need of any special group. Research has shown that the youngster who is culturally different from the middle class can gain a great deal of personal ego-strength by examining his own place and history in American life and culture.⁵ The youngster who lives isolated in the affluent cocoon of suburbia, who knows nothing except what he may hear or read about the problems of poverty, is equally different and in a minority position.⁶

Learners who come to a school from similar backgrounds and are denied a pluralistic education are not being educated in life as it occurs in the larger world.⁷ They are, in Jules Henry's terms, "learning how to be stupid."⁸ They are learning that what is taught in school bears no relationship to the outside world.

Commercial television and advertising have set the precedent in including non-whites in central settings. The question becomes, then, are educational materials producers willing to follow that lead?

If teachers and educational materials producers are committed to the idea of fostering the concept of a pluralistic society, then additional breadth and depth are needed in curriculum aids, including illustrations and prose about people of many ethnic backgrounds in realistic, meaningful life roles. □

⁵ William C. Kvaraceus et al. *Negro Self-Concept: Implications for School and Citizenship*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965.

⁶ Alice Miel and Edwin Kiester. *The Short-Changed Children of Suburbia*. New York: Institute of Human Relations Press, The American Jewish Committee, 1967.

⁷ Jean Grambs. *Intergroup Education: Methods and Materials*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968.

⁸ Jules Henry. *Culture Against Man*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1963.

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