

Today's Schools Are More Culturally Aware

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THE melting pot philosophy that operated in the schools for many years was based on a total lack of awareness of different cultures. Because of this, it was simple to reject the life styles of the minority students. When cultural differences were studied, the melting pot proponents decided the minority cultures were inferior. Again, schools were able to reject those life styles.

The present philosophy practiced by the schools has evolved from these former frames of thought. We now find a philosophy with four distinct stages. At first, schools with minority students went through a period of teaching English rapidly; second, they attempted to preserve and develop both languages; and third, they developed bicultural programs of many kinds, mostly for minorities. To a large extent, these three stages are for the single minority, vis-à-vis the majority. The fourth stage is multicultural education where students learn all they can about themselves and also other cultures.

Cultural Awareness

If culture is "the agreed upon ways in which a group orders things—the rules and manners of the group" (Abrahams, p. 120), then it follows that cultural pluralism is a way of life where cultures may coexist with equal integrity (Jaramillo). That the melting

pot concept could ever have been applicable to all Americans is doubtful. Abrahams said, "By any standard of equality, being forced to adhere to an alien cultural mode is both iniquitous and, without structural changes in national institutions and goals, clearly impossible" (Abrahams, p. 120).

If these thoughts are true, then cultural awareness simply means making people conscious of the existing cultural differences between groups of people and exploring ways of preserving and reinforcing the existing cultures. These efforts should result in marked school program changes.

During the early sixties, the term "cultural awareness" began to appear in the educational literature. Before the sixties it was seldom mentioned, and even less seldom actively utilized in educational circles. Minorities kept telling each other and sometimes even a few members of the majority group that schools should teach about the different cultures that made up America, before proceeding to cultures of other nations. They wanted everyone to know who they were, what they knew, and how they felt.

The minorities wanted the country to

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recognize them as Americans with feelings and thoughts different from those of middle class Anglo-America. They wanted to participate fully in the land of opportunity. During the middle sixties, the requests started getting louder and stronger. The requests became demands, and events at the national level gave these demands more impetus.

One of the first reactions of educators to the demand for cultural awareness was one mainly limited to the concept of "cultural deprivation," a concept basically insulting to minorities. The minorities' life styles were deemed wrong, deficient; and educators should help minorities "come up to par." However, the minorities resisted this negative definition and worked aggressively to establish the rationales for cultural pluralism. Today the "culturally disadvantaged" point of view has lost credence in the educational world.

Civil Rights and Cultural Diversity

In 1964 the Civil Rights Act gave a much-needed impetus to the emergent concept of "cultural diversity." It declared that minorities needed school programs founded on their culturally distinctive needs. The Title VII bilingual education efforts not only talked about cultural diversity, but actually promoted cultural diversity much as one promotes geographical diversity. The bilingual programs which rapidly followed were concerned with teaching English as a second language; but, more important, they believed that students whose mother tongue was not English should continue concept development in their mother tongue while systematically learning the second language. The early proponents of bilingual programs felt efforts should not be limited to "foreign" language speakers. They wanted Anglo-Americans to learn about minorities also.

Educational résumés began using more

and more cultural awareness terminology in the late sixties. It is clear that knowledge and sensitivity were needed to understand the different life styles of groups of people. This is evident from the changes that have accrued from university and adult basic education to early childhood programs across the nation.

Ethnic Studies Programs

One of the results of cultural awareness training can be seen in the ethnic studies programs which have mushroomed throughout the country. Ethnic studies started as something quite necessary to inform both students and their teachers about cultural differences. But since there was no place "available" in the main offerings, they were simply "added" to the curriculum. As a consequence, these offerings were taken mainly by students who were interested in minorities. Therefore, many students could still graduate with racist attitudes, never finding out about other cultures.

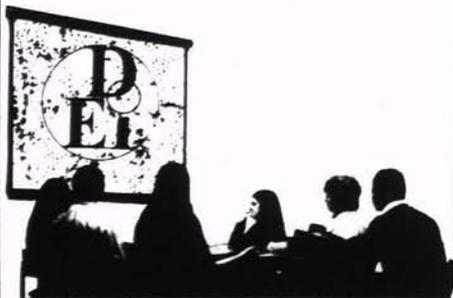
Today it seems that the number of new ethnic studies programs is subsiding, but much of the content of these programs has found its way into the regular offerings. Much of what Blacks, Chicanos, and Indians have learned about themselves is now appearing in regular history, sociology, psychology, literature, and anthropology courses. Ethnic studies also have been established in high schools and in junior high schools. Today they range across the whole educational spectrum.

Changes in Teacher Education

It appears that cultural awareness has also helped change teacher education programs to some degree. It is now understood as a prerequisite that teachers should be sensitized to cultural differences so that ethnocentric attitudes can be changed. There

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has been much work in this area, both in universities and in local school systems through their in-service programs. These changes have created a need for new materials. Some federal funding has occurred for materials development (Gonzales).

The Title IV Desegregation Centers located in various universities across the nation have also done their part to help universities and public schools understand cultural differences. One such center has processed over 2,000 school personnel through a series of group dynamics and informational experiences that have made teachers aware of the needs of minority group students in their schools (Aragón).

The regional laboratories across the nation have also dedicated much of their efforts to cultural awareness. They have developed in-service packages and many classroom materials to help in this work.

Bilingual/Bicultural Programs in Elementary Schools

At the elementary school level the bilingual/bicultural programs appear to be the direct result of cultural awareness programs. Two major program models exist with a number of variations. These are often called the transfer model and the maintenance model. In the transfer model, the children learn English as a second language as soon as possible and study in English during the rest of their schooling. The maintenance model continues cognitive development in both cultures and, of course, in both languages. These programs are not quite as numerous, but they are making headway. The following two brief descriptions will merely give the reader an idea of what is available (Cooper).

The Transfer Model. The Rough Rock Demonstration School built its curriculum around the bilingual/bicultural philosophy. The students begin their studies from Navajo and English language books written, illustrated, and printed by Navajo people at the school's Navajo Curriculum Center. While still continuing concept learning in Navajo,

they learn English from specially prepared Navajo-oriented materials. The absence of enough instructional materials in the Navajo language necessitates a transfer model here.

The Navajo parents contracted with the federal government to control the school and, with expert consultants from many fields, designed its curriculum to best benefit their children. The locally elected school board has the final say on policy, on curricula, and on fund allocation. There is also adult education where adults learn basic skills, earn high school equivalency diplomas, or gain college credit. Navajo speakers learn to read and write their language, and non-Navajo staff members study the Navajo language (Dick).

The Maintenance Model. The bilingual/bicultural program in the Albuquerque Public Schools started in 1969 at the Coronado Elementary School. Today it is in operation in four grades. In addition, the program has fanned out to 18 other schools, from kindergarten to second grade. Staff members of the Coronado school have developed Spanish curriculum guides from kindergarten through third grades. They are now developing guides for the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade levels. Text materials, standard reference books, fiction, nonfiction, and graded textbooks in all subjects are available in Spanish to support a maintenance teaching model.

Staff members received their initial training at the University of New Mexico, but today they have taken over their own in-service training and are providing leadership for other schools in the district. The staff has also developed reading charts and booklets in Spanish for use in the reading program, as well as other supplementary materials, such as language development kits and lessons, flannel board stories, Spanish alphabet, and number charts. The program's intent is to see bilingual/bicultural education available for all students, kindergarten through high school (Saavedra).

Most of these school efforts are limited to two languages and/or two cultures. Although throughout the literature there is

constant referral to multicultural efforts, this appears to be mostly theoretical. At this time, there is little evidence of a school's systematically studying several minority cultures simultaneously.

What Is the Outlook?

The efforts discussed have made deep inroads into the melting pot concept. These approaches have also begun to push aside the model of "cultural deprivation" that was used for so many years (Cole and Bruner, p. 161).

Most educators' dreams are that cultural awareness will produce students who believe in, and will work for, cultural plurality. This still remains to be seen. In the context in which it has been discussed here, there appears to be no country in the world which is a prime example of cultural pluralism; perhaps the United States can be first.

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