We Celebrate Diversity in American Education

Knowledge and life experiences help American education increasingly to treasure pluralism as essential to the survival of democratic education and, indeed, of democracy itself.

As he concluded a recent professional school visitation, an Eastern European pedagogue commented on American teachers. He said that they seem to lack an understanding of classroom social dynamics and the community of relations between themselves and students. In responding to this criticism a certain natural defensiveness seemed to emerge; however, it was tempered by the realization that American educators do not demonstrate the awareness of and commitment to cultural diversity that their socialist colleagues do in relation to a social ideology.

Indeed, American cultural pluralism seems diffused in part by the standardization of educational processes which has probably overwhelmed the celebration of awareness latent in education for cultural diversity. The inconsistency between American cultural pluralism and schooling has been widely recognized. Seymour Itzkoff has characterized this imbalance in his statement: "We have emphasized the fact that there is an inherently pluralistic thrust in knowledge and culture which must have its social environment."

In the same context, Paul Goodman warned us several years ago that: "The genius of our centralized bureaucracies has been, as they interlock, to form a mutually accrediting establishment of decision makers, with common interests and a common style that nullify the diversity of pluralism."

In spite of the ambiguities over educational conformity and cultural pluralism many educators are adopting curricula to recognize and utilize pluralism. Students are primarily responsible for this; their non-school lives are witness to diverse cultural experiences rich in awareness and celebration. They bring to educational institutions


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the knowledge of how to survive the alienation and anomie rife in American society. They also bring a certain wisdom drawn from their diverse and often intense experiences which enables celebration. Overholt and Martin have recognized one of the pedagogical consequences of this student awareness by pointing out that the educator's "inability to understand and deal with cultural diversity is one of the primary reasons that teachers have been so widely criticized in recent years." 3

Recent curriculum adaptations by teachers and students in many school systems incorporating pluralistic approaches are

grounds for hope that an intercultural curriculum of the 1970’s will be an open and non-hidden entity. The significance of these changes is exemplified by the fact that students are gaining credence in the creation and development of curriculum.

This is also indicative for a curriculum that has more reliance on and utilization of inductive approaches that emphasize the person in the reasoning process rather than total dependence on deductive method. This shift in emphasis also contributes to a new awareness of the school’s social dynamics and the community of relations between teachers and students.

As a result of this, a pluralistic curriculum assists in value clarification as teacher-student interaction is integrated into instruction. In this type of setting, the teacher’s and student’s subcultures mix more equally because of the interpersonal equity that results.

This kind of environment challenges the traditional schooling functions and knowledge. The bifurcation of adult and juvenile social role playing is superseded by a need to understand social traumas which equally affect teachers and students. This form of curriculum utilizes students’ desires to participate in decision making which can be matched with the teacher’s desire to enable fruitful educational activities and learnings.

The proper curriculum balance between the emphasis of student/teacher learning about the problems of modern life including drugs, moral ambiguities, boredom, ethnicity, social and technological change, and the traditional educational communication skills is struck when both areas are given equal attention. From our experience teachers using a pluralistic curriculum are most concerned with translating knowledge and integrating life’s experiences, which is a vastly different teaching role than imparting information for student consumption.

Knowledge and Life Experiences

To succeed in their new roles, teachers of cultural pluralism draw not only on their intellectual and professional experiences in science, math, social science, and humanities but also on their personal talent, their aesthetic senses, and the reservoir of social and school interactions. For instance, an instructor in literature redefines the significance of ethnic pieces by interacting with students through nonverbal communication. Silence, for example, can communicate significant learning, contrary to traditional pedagogical notions.

One teacher honored this axiom by understanding a class’s silent response to her analytical interpretive questions about Mao’s poetry. In silence learners derive personal and private meanings that group discussion could distort. It is quite clear to us from these observations that if consensus education is to be superseded by cultural diversity, a heightened sensitivity to additional patterns of learning must take place.

For increasing numbers of students and teachers, intercultural education implies a constant translation of knowledge and integration of life experiences. Unfortunately, learning for diversity will be undermined if study units are simply interchanged as blocks or treated as exotic elements. For an educational curriculum to become truly pluralistic it must provide participants with a comprehension of decision-making processes in diverse settings.

It is self-evident that Americans enjoy a diverse ethnography. Understanding and celebrating it are as much a part of the success of the intercultural curriculum as is an awareness and sensitivity of interactions with non-American cultures. Intercultural teacher/student learners need to clarify and celebrate the diverse nature of American culture. Our fascination with and exploration of American life and events should accompany meaningful intercultural comparisons. It is only when one establishes and maintains meaning about one’s own cultural experiences that the nature of other lives and cultures can be interpreted. In the final analysis, the celebration of awareness of American pluralism is vital for an interactive curriculum.

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