

Toward Economic and Ethnic Diversity

George Henderson

The task of concerned curriculum planners becomes even more complicated if they are to provide opportunities for economic mobility without sacrificing ethnic diversity which can best derive from a liberal or broad based education.

SCHOOL districts which successfully design curricula for economic and ethnic diversity set in motion a memorable process. By this process their students can walk in dignity, eat a wholesome diet, sleep in a decent house, live in economic and social freedom, and, in the end, die a timely death unhurried by malnutrition and racism. Clearly, this is not much to ask of our schools; but it will be everything to refuse such an opportunity for our children.¹

Organized education is an activity specifically human. Its foremost function is to transmit culture and to develop the power and sensibility of flexible young minds. Thus it necessarily follows that in performing their

¹ See: Paul Good. "To Live in Freedom, To Die a Timely Death." In: George Henderson, editor. *America's Other Children: Public Schools Outside Suburbia*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970. p. 420.

functions, schools affect individual self-concepts, group processes, and ways of life for present and future generations.

Whose Responsibility?

While all elements of a community should play a role in the formal education of students, it is the schools which are held accountable for children becoming functional members of our society. Indeed, it is as though parents and community leaders bring the children—kicking and screaming—to the school door, leave them, and tell school personnel: "We'll take them back when you have taught them how to be productive citizens."

In fulfilling their responsibility, many educators are beginning to give more attention to developing a curriculum which is productive of *action* rather than *reaction*.

Gradually, the importance of communication skills is being recognized—especially in schools that engender the confidence which comes from social acceptance and peer approval. In order to create a curriculum that will fit a learner comfortably into a diverse society it is necessary for teachers: (a) to encourage the raising of relevant questions by all elements of the community,

(b) to collect and interpret representative data, (c) to amplify consumer demands, (d) to communicate prospective producer needs, and (e) to understand the diverse values in their communities.

Of course, self-examination by those responsible for designing the curriculum is necessary to make them aware of their own negative attitudes. One of the chief shortcomings of educators in bringing students to the maximum performance that will make them functional in a diverse society has been negative attitudes. When a teacher bases his or her expectations of students' performances on the students' social status, children of low social status suffer an almost permanent debilitation outside of their own choice or will.

A truly functional human being cannot be transferred from school to the larger society if he or she is educated in a setting which develops or perpetuates a caste system. For assuredly, today's "classroom caste" will become tomorrow's "social class."

A Vehicle for Economic Mobility

In our highly industrialized and mechanized culture those responsible for curriculum development are confronted with increasingly complex economic problems. For the first time since its ascendancy, the United States finds itself seriously challenged as a leading economic power of the world. We have a rate of unemployment that is too high, and a gross national product that is too low. In addition, more of our people are engaged in services than in production; and there are glaring imbalances within the service occupations—for example, an oversupply of teachers and an undersupply of doctors.

When attempting to gather data to assist in better curriculum design, educators are hampered by a national research budget which allocates 50 percent of its resources to defense exploration but only 1/5 of 1 percent to educational research. Even so, a cursory glance at our economy makes it apparent that with daily increasing shortages of consumer goods, we must either produce more

or consume less. Accepting the former course, national emphasis in education is being placed on vocational and technical curricula, for it is here that people are trained to produce and maintain the goods demanded for day-to-day consumption.

The practicality of this focus is, of course, apparent. Yet the task of concerned curriculum planners becomes even more complicated if they are to provide opportunities for economic mobility without sacrificing ethnic diversity which can best derive from a liberal or broad based education.

New and imaginative concepts and combinations of curriculum must be explored if we are to correlate student supply with industrial demands. With the increasing emphasis on vocational and technical education, it will be the task of those committed to humanistic curriculum development to see that students trained to meet the immediate needs of industry are not programmed into employment castes from which they cannot escape. The dangling carrot of economic mobility can seduce the unwary not only toward freedom but also, under certain conditions, toward material servitude. Therefore, in training students to meet the career demands of our culture, we must exercise care in course planning that will include exposure and experience in making value judgments.

A humanistic curriculum that will contribute most conscientiously as a vehicle for economic mobility is one which will (a) consider and satisfy the occupational needs to be fulfilled by both the individual student and the community, (b) present goals beyond the initial career encounter, and (c) devise educational content, methodology, and format which will build upon the strengths of students coming from several multiethnic backgrounds.

Respect for Economic and Cultural Diversity

Education should be an apprenticeship for life. If the positive aspects of any society result from the cooperative efforts of its constituents, schools and universities offer the ideal setting for the communication, under-

standing, and consequent enrichment that all constituent elements of our culture have to offer to each other. Formal education affords an opportunity for people to learn in theory, and perform in practice, the creative process of exchanging differences.

Institutions of learning through consecrated curriculum and dedicated teachers can appeal to the highest of human values. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. DuBois cautioned:

We are training not isolated men but a living group of men—nay, a group within a group. And the final product of our training must be neither a psychologist nor a brickmason, but a man.²

Those sharing the responsibility for charting the direction students will take should never lose sight of the final purpose of education: To reinforce the relevance and interlocking community of all humanhood.

Through the eyes of our children we can look at America and see an endless series of beautiful and ugly ironies. For these children, reared in a predominantly affluent society which reflects a technological now-you-see-it-world, there are few places to hide either our humanity or our inhumanity. From the mass media—television, radio, and newspapers—children are socialized in a nation being torn apart by civil disorders, socioeconomic deprivations, racism, and sexism. No other generation of young people has been so widely exposed to the totality of the nation and the world they live in.

Some writers point out that we have become a mass communication and rapid transportation society whose technology has stripped us naked and revealed our hatred, violence, and social concerns. It is these and other conditions which cause me to conclude that the primary need of all children (and adults) is to learn to accept themselves and to have respect for themselves and others.³

Some of the ways that education, through curriculum, can provide a major

channel of respect for economic and cultural diversity are: (a) to emphasize the dignity and satisfaction of work per se rather than the attainment of some high occupational level; (b) to research, compile, and present job opportunities in occupations which require college and less than full college education; (c) to acquaint students with institutions which provide quality education and training directly related to available career opportunities; (d) to counsel students more effectively so they will not develop aspirations beyond their abilities; (e) to offer vocational interest and skills courses that will enrich and supplement occupational deficits; (f) to provide remedial programs for those who suffer from failures in pre-school or in-school activities; and (g) to procure and utilize teaching materials relevant to all students of all backgrounds so their differences may be understood, accepted, and respected as enriching the nation.

Urgently desirable are the cooperative efforts of an understanding community working together to combine humanizing and enriching courses and experiences with those that will prepare workers for realistic labor needs. Only so can we avoid the conflicts that are certain to arise if the edifying and unifying drives of men and women are left untended. All that is developed or left undeveloped of human resources will shape not only the essence of future generations but may in fact affect their very existence. Therefore, educational potentiality must cease to exist in an academic vacuum.

The quality of a society stands in direct relationship to the preparation of its youth for responsibility and authority. Positive results can only be achieved by the total effort of involved communities. For instance, the depletion of oil and other material resources is serious only if we fail to develop the human resources to find solutions to these problems. Ultimately, if children do not learn to be humane workers, the effects for all may not be merely serious but may also prove fatal.

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² W. E. B. DuBois. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1961. p. 72.

³ Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 379.

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