

# Cultural Pluralism and the Schools

**James A. Banks**

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**D**URING the Colonial period, many different ethnic and nationality groups immigrated to North America to practice freely their religious and political beliefs and to improve their economic status. These groups were provincial, ethnocentric, and intolerant of ethnic differences. Each nationality group tried desperately to establish European institutions on American soil and to remake North America in the image of its native land.<sup>1</sup>

Very early in Colonial history the English became the dominant ethnic group, and controlled entry to most social, economic, and political institutions. The English did not allow immigrants from other nations to participate fully in the social system. Thus, the French Huguenots, the Irish, the Scotch-Irish, and the Germans were victims of overt discrimination in Colonial America. The attainment of Anglo characteristics became

<sup>1</sup> Maldwyn Allen Jones. *American Immigration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.

a requisite for full societal participation. Immigrants who remained distinctly "ethnic" were punished and ridiculed.

## The Melting Pot Ideology

The public schools, like other social institutions, were dominated by Anglo-Americans. One of their major functions was to rid children of ethnic characteristics and to make them culturally Anglo-Saxon. The schools taught the children of immigrants contempt for their cultures and forced them to experience self-alienation and self-rejection. The melting pot ideology, which was popularized by the English Jewish author, Israel Zangwill, became the philosophical justification for the cultural and ethnic destruction which the schools promoted. All European cultures, it was argued, were to be blended and from them a novel and superior culture would emerge. Most immigrants, however, abandoned their cultures and attained Anglo cultural characteristics. One dominant culture emerged rather than a synthesis of diverse cultures. Most of the non-English cultures stuck to the bottom of the mythical melting pot.

In many significant ways, the Anglo-dominated society, and the schools which helped to perpetuate it, succeeded both in acculturating European-Americans and in

helping them to attain inclusion into mainstream American life. Once they attained Anglo-American characteristics, most European-Americans were able to participate fully in the social, economic, and political life of American society. We should, however, not underestimate the psychological pain which this process of self-alienation and re-socialization caused European immigrants and their descendants. Today, most American children of European descent find the school culture highly consistent with their culture, although a few, such as Amish and Appalachian youths, do not. However, this is not the case for most minority youths.

### The Alien School Culture

Many ethnic minority youths find the school culture alien, hostile, and self-defeating. Because of institutional racism, poverty, and other complex factors, most ethnic minority communities are characterized by numerous values, institutions, behavior patterns, and linguistic traits which differ in significant ways from the dominant society.

The youths who are socialized within these ethnic communities enter the school with cultural characteristics which the school rejects and demeans. These youths are also dehumanized in the school because they are non-White. Because of the negative ways in which their cultural and racial traits are viewed by the school, educators fail to help most minority youths to acquire the skills which they need to function effectively within the two cultural worlds in which they must survive. Consequently, many of them drop out of school, psychologically and physically.

### The School's Role in a Pluralistic Society

What should be the role of the school within a society which has a dominant culture and many other cultures which, according to the democratic ideology that we extol, have a right to thrive? The school in this type of society has a difficult task, especially when those who make most of the major public decisions do not value, and often disdain, the minority cultures. This harsh reality must



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be seriously considered when we talk about the role of the school in a pluralistic society. Although cultural pluralism exists within American society, most major decisions in government and in industry are made by Anglo-Americans, many of whom are ethnocentric and intolerant of cultural, ethnic, and racial differences.

The school must help Anglo-Americans to break out of their ethnic encapsulations and to learn that there are other viable cultures in the United States, aspects of which can help to redeem and to revivify the dominant culture. The school should also help all students to develop *ethnic literacy*, since most Americans are very ignorant about cultures in the United States other than their own. Americans are socialized within ethnic enclaves where they acquire the belief that their ethnic cultures are the only valid and functional ones. To attain social and economic mobility, minorities are required to function in the dominant culture and are thus forced out of their ethnic encapsulations. However, Anglo-Americans are able to remain within their ethnic enclaves. Most minorities, nevertheless, are very ignorant about other minorities. Most Mexican-Americans know little about the cultures and problems of Afro-Americans. Most Afro-Americans know as little about the diverse and complex cultures of Mexican-Americans.

### **The Need for Broadly Conceptualized Ethnic Studies Programs**

Broadly conceptualized ethnic heritage programs should be devised and implemented in all schools. Such programs should teach about the experiences of all American ethnic groups, including Jewish-Americans, Polish-Americans, and Puerto Rican-Americans. Most ethnic studies programs now in the schools deal only with the history and culture of the ethnic minority group which is present or dominant within the local school population.

Thus, it is rare to find an ethnic heritage program within a predominantly Black school which teaches about the experiences of Asian-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and

Puerto Rican-Americans. Such narrowly conceptualized ethnic studies programs are parochial in scope and do not help students to develop the global view of ethnicity in the United States which they need to become effective change agents in contemporary society. We have reached a point in our history in which multiethnic approaches to the teaching of ethnic studies are not only appropriate but essential.<sup>2</sup>

### **Maximizing Cultural Options**

The school within a pluralistic society should maximize the cultural and economic options of students from all income and ethnic groups. Minority students should be helped to attain the skills needed to function effectively both within their ethnic cultures and within the dominant culture. Black children who speak "Black English" should leave the school sensitive to the utility of their native dialect but proficient in Standard English. If Black high school graduates are unable to speak and to write Standard English, their careers and social options will be severely limited.

By arguing that the school must help minority youths to attain the skills needed to function effectively within the dominant culture, I do not mean to suggest that the school should conduct business as usual, and continue to demean the languages and cultures of minority students. Rather, educators should respect the cultural and linguistic characteristics of minority youths, and change the curriculum so that it will reflect their learning and cultural styles and greatly enhance their achievement.<sup>3</sup> Minority students should not be taught contempt for their cultures. Teachers should use elements of their cultures to help them to attain the skills

<sup>2</sup> This point is further developed and illustrated in: James A. Banks. *Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Alfredo Castañeda. "Persisting Ideological Issues of Assimilation in America: Implications for Assessment Practices in Psychology and Education." In: Edgar G. Epps, editor. *Cultural Pluralism*. Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1974. pp. 56-70.

which they need to live alternative life styles.

Anglo-American students should also be taught that they have cultural options. We severely limit the potentiality of students when we merely teach them aspects of their own cultures. Anglo-American students should realize that using Black English is one effective way to communicate, that Native Americans have values, beliefs, and life styles which may be functional for them, and that there are alternative ways of behaving and of viewing the universe which are practiced within the United States that they can freely embrace. By helping Anglo-American students to view the world beyond their cultural perspectives, we will enrich them as human beings and enable them to live more productive and fulfilling lives.

### Teaching for Social Reform

It is necessary but not sufficient for the school to help minority children to acquire the skills which they need to attain economic and social mobility. It must also help equip them with the skills, attitudes, and abilities needed to attain *power* so that they can effectively participate in the reformation of the social system. We will perpetuate the status quo if we merely acculturate students so that they will fit into the Anglo-Saxon mold. They must acquire both the skills and the commitment to engage in *radical social change* if we are ever going to create a society in which individuals and groups can freely participate without regard to their ethnicity, sex, and social class. If the school acculturates as well as politicizes students so that they become committed to radical reform, we should realize that it will be contradicting its historic mission of perpetuating the status quo and will be engaging in a subversive task.<sup>4</sup>

### Cultural Pluralism: A Caveat

While the school should reflect and per-

<sup>4</sup> Mildred Dickeman. "Teaching Cultural Pluralism." In: James A. Banks, editor. *Teaching Ethnic Studies: Concepts and Strategies*. Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1973. p. 18.

petuate cultural diversity, it has a responsibility to teach a commitment to and respect for the core values, such as justice, equality, and human dignity, which are expressed in our major historical documents. If carried to its logical extreme, the *cultural pluralism* argument can be used to justify racism, cultural genocide, and other cultural practices which are antithetical to a democratic society. There is also a danger that *cultural pluralism* may become the new myth, replacing the *melting pot*. This concept must be rigorously examined for all of its social and philosophical ramifications. The works of earlier advocates of cultural pluralism, such as Horace M. Kallen, who originated the concept, and of Julius Drachler, merit serious study.<sup>5</sup>

We should not exaggerate the extent of cultural pluralism in the United States, and should realize that widespread cultural assimilation has taken place in America.<sup>6</sup> To try to perceive cultural differences where none exist may be as detrimental as ignoring those which are real. The school should foster those cultural differences which maximize opportunities for democratic living, but vigorously oppose those which do not. We should realize that racism, sexism, and dehumanization are also aspects of human cultures which can be justified with the cultural pluralism argument. Emerging concepts and unexamined ideas must not be used to divert attention from the humanistic goals that we have too long deferred, or from the major cause of our social ills—*institutional racism*.

<sup>5</sup> Horace M. Kallen. *Culture and Democracy in the United States*. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924; Julius Drachler. *Democracy and Assimilation: The Blending of Immigrant Heritages in America*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920. Milton M. Gordon presents a perceptive critique and analysis of *cultural pluralism* in: *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964. pp. 132-59.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon, *op. cit.*, argues that widespread cultural assimilation has taken place in American life but that American society is *structurally pluralistic*.

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