

# Criteria for Cultural Pluralism in the Classroom

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*The curriculum plays a paramount role in influencing the attitudes of the students. As educators, we must make certain that the curriculum respects the dignity of all people.*

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Men are made of the same stuff, are destined for the same cycles of birth and death, love and hate, happiness and tragedy. This universality of thought expressed in social law is not one that demands sameness of all of man's actions, or claims that talent and weakness are uniformly distributed. Men need not share the same symbols of language, religion, and culture to be worthy of human treatment.<sup>1</sup>

**F**ROM preschool to college, schools play a vital role in molding the attitudes and beliefs of the youth of our society. The curriculum and teachers within the schools serve as the primary instrument for facilitating and implementing this molding process. The teacher's role is that of diagnostician, prescriber, and interpreter within the learning environment, using the curriculum to provide the content, learning experiences, and activities needed to meet the school's goals. The importance of having a curriculum that is capable of responding to the diverse needs of a pluralistic society is most essential because such a curriculum

<sup>1</sup> Seymour W. Itzkoff. *Cultural Pluralism and American Education*. Scranton, Pennsylvania: International Textbook Company, 1969. pp. 105-106.

has as one of its primary goals the enhancement of individual self-esteem by helping members of various racial and ethnic groups to retain and value their cultural identity.

A culturally pluralistic curriculum must be consistent with the goals of our culturally diverse society. Such a curriculum should be characterized by mutual understanding and respect, equal worthiness of all cultural groups, and recognition of important contributions to society which each of these groups has made. Cultural differences are prized and given full expression to the extent that students of all ages, from all cultures and socioeconomic groups, learn and interact together. Students learn respect and trust for one another by receiving respect and trust.

Black psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint bluntly points out the need for a culturally pluralistic curriculum:

Students should not be viewed as some homogeneous, monolithic group that can be fitted into a rigid educational machine designed to service yesterday's model of a white middle-class child. A curriculum designed to meet the needs of a child in white suburbia may fail miserably if foisted unmodified on black youth in the ghettos. Variations in experiences and lifestyles mean that different people need different things at any given time. No single approach or method works effectively with everybody. Schools should have the flexibility

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of styles and approaches to work with a variety of classes of youth.<sup>2</sup>

For too long the curricula have prepared students to perceive society as composed of unequals, equals, and more equals.

### The Evaluative Criteria

The development of a curriculum, or the modification of an existing curriculum to be consistent with the goals of a culturally pluralistic society, places a tremendous responsibility on the teachers. The teachers must be able to evaluate the curriculum to decide if it meets criteria for a pluralistic society and to determine what curriculum changes are needed.

A first step that can be taken by teachers to meet the goal successfully is the development of comprehensive criteria for evaluating a culturally pluralistic curriculum.

<sup>2</sup> Alvin F. Poussaint. "The Black Child's Image of the Future." In: Alvin Toffler, editor. *Learning for Tomorrow*. New York: Vintage Books, Random House, Inc., 1974. p. 71.

Evaluation criteria would facilitate the systematic, comprehensive, and objective review of curricula in an attempt to identify concepts or areas that do not adhere to the goals of cultural pluralism. Evaluation criteria will also help teachers and other concerned individuals to become aware of their subjectiveness, as well as their own biases and prejudices.

The development of evaluative criteria can be an excellent project for an in-service program. However, to be relevant to the needs of the local community and society at large, any evaluation group should include wide representation from the educational community, such as teacher associations, and the general community, such as parents of the students.

Although no evaluative criteria will satisfy all situations, there are some areas of general concern that can be met. The following list hopefully can encourage teachers and other concerned individuals to examine their school curriculum to ascertain its responsiveness to a culturally pluralistic society.



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Cultural differences should be prized and given full expression to the extent that students of all ages, from all cultures and socioeconomic groups, learn and interact together.

A culturally pluralistic curriculum should:

1. Reflect the pluralistic nature of our society, both past and present
2. Present diversity of culture, ethnicity, and custom as a strong positive feature of our nation's heritage
3. Present the cultural, sexual, and racial groups in our society in a manner that will build mutual respect and understanding
4. Portray people—boys and girls, men and women—whatever their culture, as displaying various human emotions, both negative and positive. Individuals of different cultural groups should be described working and playing together
5. Provide a balanced representation of cultural groups
6. Present members of various cultural groups in positions of authority
7. Examine the societal forces and conditions which operate to optimize or minimize

the opportunities of minority group individuals

8. Help students to gain knowledge and appreciation of the many contributions to our civilization made by members of various cultural groups

9. Show that every cultural group has many individuals, such as educators, scientists, artists, writers, architects, and others, who have made important contributions to society

10. Portray cultures other than from a "special occasion" point-of-view. For example: Is there usually a "piñata" when studying Mexico? Are Native Americans presented mostly around Thanksgiving? Is the study of Blacks confined to Black History Week? Are Asian Americans usually studied around the Chinese New Year?

11. Present a wide representation of the many cultures in the world in the total curriculum from kindergarten to twelfth grade

12. Include an equal representation of the cultures presented in the United States in the total curriculum from kindergarten to twelfth grade

13. Examine real problems and real people of the various cultures and not just heroes and highlights

14. Provide experiences that will help build positive attitudes of a student's own cultural group and acceptance of other cultural groups

15. Use words and phrases that are complimentary and honest for the culture

16. Make certain that cultures are not presented separate or in isolation from each other. A pluralistic curriculum should provide experiences that show how people of one culture have adopted food, clothing, language, etc., from other cultures.

17. Present all sides of an issue utilizing primary resources whenever possible.

The curriculum plays a paramount role in influencing the attitudes of the students. As educators, we must make certain that the curriculum respects the dignity of *all* people. □

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