

# Cultural Pluralism as ASCD's Major Thrust

JAMES B. MACDONALD\*

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*Through allegiance to cultural pluralism, schools can become committed to encouraging diversity, personal choice, social concern for rational analysis of life styles and alternatives, and facilitating value clarification and decision making.*

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**A**T THE Spring 1974 meeting of the ASCD Executive Council, following considerable discussion in the Board of Directors meeting at Anaheim, a priority commitment to the organizing theme of "Cultural Pluralism" was proposed for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Two separate problems appeared to be related to the selection of a broad thematic focus for the organization. The first problem concerned the idea of a focal theme itself, and the second the nature and definition of that theme.

The concern about a broad flexible but directional theme for the organization had been discussed for several years. It involved the awareness of limited resources in the organization, the desire to maximize ASCD's impact on the field of education, and the need for criteria and direction that would facilitate program decision-making on a more rational basis. There appeared to be wide agreement on the potential desirability of some central theme.

The selection of "Cultural Pluralism" as an organizing theme grew out of three major considerations: (a) a broadening concern for educational futures; (b) a realization of the social and cultural changes taking place in our society; and the impact of these changes on the organization in terms of its constituency and functioning; and (c) the historically evolved nexus of values that had come to distinguish ASCD from other professional organizations.

Immediate Past President Harold Shane's concern for educational futures, resulted (among other things) in two major inputs to the decision. In August of 1973, ASCD held a small conference of futurists in Washington, D.C. Included among the notables at this meeting were Alvin Toffler, Lester Brown, and John Platt. The group consisted of about 15 persons and the Executive Council's Priorities Subcommittee<sup>1</sup> was invited to observe and was given a period of time

<sup>1</sup> The Subcommittee at that time consisted of Benjamin Ebersole, Minnie Fields, James Macdonald (Chairman), and Glenys Unruh (President Elect). Meetings that were held included staff attendance by Gordon Cawelti, Executive Secretary, and Clark Dobson, Associate Secretary. Geneva Gay joined the group from the staff when she began her assignment as the replacement for Clark Dobson.

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toward the close of the two day session to raise questions from the point of view of the organization's future. Further, the Annual Conference program at Anaheim included a number of presentations by futurists, and from these two sources came material which contributed to the Priorities Subcommittee recommendations.

The major insight contributed by the futurists' concerns was the conviction that we are entering an era which will be characterized by dramatic change in our social and cultural lives.

This was based upon such phenomena as the limits of energy and mineral resources in the world, population growth and food shortages, present unequal distribution and usage of limited resources between the West and "emerging nations," and the threatening world ecological crisis.

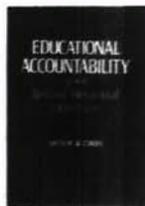
The major reflection of these phenomena for us can be seen in runaway inflation, dollar devaluation, and real or impending re-

cession or perhaps depression. In short our material wealth and our standard of living have only one way to go—down!

## Which of Two Possible Responses?

From this the futurists reasoned that two responses (short of nuclear holocaust over resource scarcities) are most probable: (a) what they termed a "Friendly Fascist State," or (b) the development of intentional communities with pluralistic life styles. Thus, they appear to be saying we will either become more regimented, law and order oriented with greater centralized control, or we will diffuse our control and develop less technical, more participatory communities with emphasis upon social relationships rather than material wealth. Given these options, the Executive Council recommended we put whatever concern ASCD had toward the latter option—a pluralistic development of intentional life styles.

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The second consideration, our recent social and cultural crisis, reflected what we interpreted as a strong desire for human rights and social justice. These forces have resulted in reexamining the class structure, working on racial and other minority civil rights, concerns about women's liberation, student rights, and the general thrust of "emerging nations" for a decent quality of life. The key concepts here would appear to be liberation and justice through the right of self-determination without serving the interests of "others." In this sense the "Cultural Pluralism" theme seemed decidedly appropriate.

The final consideration, concern for the tradition and value nexus of the organization led to the conclusion that what was unique about ASCD was that it was not a special interest organization, per se;<sup>2</sup> but that curriculum and supervision have been concerned with broader human values and the total perspective of the educational scene. Thus, the traditional "humanistic" thrust of the organization seemed to be the major concern for human rights and potential pluralistic life styles.

The major problem with the selection of "Cultural Pluralism" as a theme appeared to arise from the connotations of ethnic and racial segregation it carried for many. Many of us are, I suppose, tacitly committed to a "melting pot" philosophy. However, it is the opinion of many of us that a "melting pot" could only lead to extreme cultural conformity and control (if it ever could be realized); and that our goal should be to encourage diversity, not as separatism by group but as an intentional choice of life style by all individuals. And, it is in this sense that "Cultural Pluralism" seemed appropriate in light of the three major considerations outlined here.

It is important to highlight the distinction in our definition. Many critics of the "Cultural Pluralism" position consider it to be a "cop out"—in the sense that implicitly it leaves the status quo of separatism un-

<sup>2</sup> That is, with a single major focus, such as reading, research, or educational psychology.

touched. The position here is a hybrid one which rejects traditional separatism as we have known it, but welcomes diversity as culturally enriching and as the greatest pos-

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The critical point, and the place where education appears to become a crucial part of the picture is the necessity for some societal arrangements whereby alternative life style options in relation to individual needs are made known; rational thinking about alternatives takes place; and value clarification, development, and selection result in personal choice. Thus, the schools become committed to encouraging diversity, personal choice, social concern for rational analysis of life styles and alternatives, and facilitating value clarification and decision making.

This thrust is, after all, not so unique to this organization; for it explicitly promotes our commitments to human liberation, social justice, and individual self-realization through encouraging and working toward school practices and programs that can fulfill the social dreams of democracy and the psychological aims of health and development in the context of contemporary times. And it is to these ends that the "Cultural Pluralism" theme was cast. □

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