

American Schools vs. Cultural Pluralism?

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The fact that multicultural classes have built-in problems is as obvious as is the fact that multicultural classes possess unique opportunities for young people to learn how to become modern Americans.

AFTER having been out of the country for several months on a teaching assignment, I returned to visit several American schools. This was not my first travel abroad, nor was it my first exposure to American schools. Actually, not only did I receive all of my formal education in American schools, I also had taught in both rural and urban schools. Yet since these schools are characterized by many common features, I assumed that schools were schools, regardless of their location. This false assumption had made me somewhat oblivious to the environments in American schools.

Factors Impeding Progress

Several months of continuous experience in some 30 British schools made me keenly aware of several characteristics of American schools which seem to hinder our

attempts to provide for culturally different students. Such characteristics apparently are unknown to British schools. The following is a discussion of several qualities which I believe impede our attempts to help the cultural minority student.

● *American Schools Are Too Large.* Most minority groups in this country live in the large cities. Ironically, most of the large schools in this country are in the big cities. But what do we mean by large? For an American school to be considered large it must have an enrollment of at least 2,000 students; and, of course, many of our schools today have twice this enrollment. In London, the two largest comprehensive schools attract considerable attention because of their untraditionally large enrollments of 2,000 to 2,200 pupils. While one of these schools is located in a beautiful community on the far outskirts of the city, there exists considerable concern for the lack of discipline and lack of respect the pupils have for the school, the teachers, and themselves—a condition attrib-

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uted to the vast size of the school. Yet, an American school of equal size is common. Of what special significance is the size of a school to a minority culture student?

The culturally different student needs to feel identity and self-esteem as much as does his resident counterpart. As one author expressed it: "The late arrivals—Negroes, poor whites, Mexican-Americans, and other minority groups—are seeking membership in the defining group, the middle class."¹ Furthermore, each minority group has unique needs for improving the self image of its members. For example, a recent study funded by the U.S. Office of Education supported the generally accepted belief that the most crucial need of the American Negro is not just for a more positive self-concept, but rather for self-identity.

The study found that members of this minority group have been hindered by what it called a "neutral self-concept." They have failed to think of themselves at all.² While this condition is rapidly improving for this group, the schools are probably due little credit for the changes; and other minority groups continue to suffer other problems with identity. For example, the Mexican-American's self-image remains negative, and, according to one source, "This negative self-image is seen as being a principal reason for the group's lack of school success."³

If we can assume that adolescents of all cultures share the need for peer approval and the approval of their adult leaders, and that our very large schools tend to be impersonal, then we should conclude that the size of the school can have a tendency to lower the amount of badly needed personal attention given to all students. This is especially true in the case of minority culture students

¹ Eugene Kruszynski. "The Nature of Urban Education." *School & Society* 98 (2324): 166-68; March 1970.

² J. David Colfax. "The Cognitive Self-Concept and School Segregation: Some Preliminary Findings." In: William Brickman and Stanley Lehrer, editors. *Education and the Many Faces of the Disadvantaged*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1972. 435 pp.

³ Thomas P. Carter. "The Negative Self-Concept of Mexican-American Students." Brickman and Lehrer, *ibid.*



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who are frequently ignored by teachers and peers who do not understand them. That Americans accept this as a valid criticism of large schools is evidenced by our development of pods, modules, and special home-rooms in many of our larger schools.

● *American Schools Are Too Test Oriented.* The student with a culturally different background suffers more in American schools than does his or her counterpart in other schools throughout the world because the ability range is wider in American schools. Any student may find himself or herself competing with a student of infinitely more potential. Because tests and grades are so much a part of American schools they often come to mean everything to students, parents, and teachers.

As persons in higher education our response has been to agree philosophically with such writers as Holt⁴ and Simon,⁵ who caution us that grades are overdone frequently to the point of becoming detrimental to children and adolescents. But then we say that we must be practical and we continue our

⁴ John Holt. "The Tyranny of Testing." In: *The Underachieving School*. New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1970. pp. 51-63.

⁵ Sidney Simon and others. *Wad-Ja-Get?* New York: Hart Publishing Co., Inc., 1971. 315 pp.

overemphasis of tests and grades because parents insist on them. Our conclusion then is that our overemphasizing of grades is a necessary evil—and is beyond our control.

If we explored the real reason for this problem, we would probably find that much of the overemphasis on grades is due to tradition. We continue to hold onto practice which grew out of our belief that our society was a totally competitive one and that since our schools should be microcosms of the society at large, each classroom must be a hotbed of competition. But with the increase in population and decrease of natural resources in America and throughout the world, we are left with the reality that not all problems can be resolved through everyone competing to grow more food, build more synthetic products, and make larger bombs. Our society has come to realize that it must look for many answers not to competition but to cooperation. Somehow, our schools have not made this change in perspective.

● *American Schools Are Too Practical.* Perhaps, theoretically at least, a school could

never be too practical. However, it is obvious to the visiting educator that our schools operate almost exclusively on a practical level. Too often the objective is to find the correct answer to the assignment without bothering to ask why the answer is being sought. Because of this continuous emphasis on practicality, our students do not always engage in mental exercises which allow them to synthesize and internalize the problem, relating it to their own values and beliefs. For example, if we look at American students of biology we are more apt to see them focusing their total attention on an amoeba or a similar classification of plant or animal life, learning as much as possible about the specimen, *without* necessarily ever entertaining the concept of why they are studying it, its relationships to its environment, how it affects them, or what they could do to improve their lives as a consequence of gaining this knowledge.

Specifically, we spend too much time with tasks which lead to true-false, multiple choice, and matching ends, and we do not spend enough time writing discussion papers

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and taking subjective type examinations. Too frequently, students are not required to defend their positions and, therefore, too often they do not know why they believe as they do.

Since a multicultural society contains several natural communication barriers such as different languages, customs, and value systems, multicultural students need experiences which provide opportunities for them to learn to analyze, identify, and express their ideas. Our curriculum needs more open-ended tasks which allow students to search out their feelings, values, and priorities.

● *American Schools Lack Respect.* Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that education and educators are not always respected. In America it is ironic how everyone believes that their own children should complete secondary school and go to college, and those who are able are glad to support this endeavor. Yet, the teacher is not respected for his or her expertise; and everyone feels competent to tell the principal how the school should be run. Even the student is not respected. The same community which becomes so enthusiastic over athletics that it cannot be controlled may host a speaking debate and be fortunate to draw 25 people, most of whom come to see their sons or daughters and may care little about the logical strategies displayed.

Thus, the route to social acceptance and recognition for the culturally different students is limited to one channel—athletics. This also eliminates females, because in our society recognition for athletes is most often limited to males. And of course those minority students who are not good at athletics yet who may be academically strong go unrewarded and unrecognized.

Like the British and European schools, our schools need more programs which recognize the importance of academics and enable students to achieve recognition for their academic endeavors. We need more oral debates, more publicity for classroom research projects, and more academic tournaments, making the academic competition among schools rather than among peers.

Culturally different students are special only in that they are different, and like all students possess unique interests, talents, and feelings. We must learn to make possible a larger variety of achievements, and develop a system to reward each.

● *American Schools Pamper Students—Especially Members of Minority Cultures.* While using the British underground transportation system (the tube) daily to go to and from some 30 schools where I supervised student teachers, I remember a sign posted in many of the cars which carried the message, "Drop out of school and come work for us." In our country, we begin pampering our students by coercing them to stay in school. Regardless of their potential and interests, we use threats such as "You must have the degree to get the job, promotion, and larger income." Pupils need only to look at their teachers to see the inconsistency in our advice.

Like their counterparts, some minority culture students are low achievers, but we must remember that some minority culture students are highly successful. Also, we must remember that failure to achieve is often a result of low motivation rather than low ability.

To overcome these barriers we must find ways of making school more personal to culturally different students. We must create more success channels whereby these students can earn recognition for their achievements. We must provide tasks which will permit them to reveal their knowledge and express their feelings. Since these goals are not likely to occur for many in a keenly competitive environment, we must tone down classroom competition and tune in classroom cooperation. The fact that multicultural classes have built-in problems is as obvious as is the fact that multicultural classes possess unique opportunities for young people to learn how to become modern Americans. However, until teachers take the initiative necessary to capitalize on this uniqueness, the potentials will remain hidden and the problems will remain the dominating characteristics of multicultural classes. □

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