Ethnic Studies in the United States

What is the current status of the ethnic studies introduced in school systems in recent years? This survey analyzes various aspects of these studies and draws conclusions as to their availability and significance.

What do we know of one another, the peoples of the United States? Do we have a shared experience which binds us as a nation? In a sense we do, but in a larger sense we are many peoples with many experiences. If we are to come to know and appreciate one another, an effort must be made to share the experiences that are not common.

Many educators, aware of the fact of cultural pluralism in this country and, further, recognizing that it is within their classrooms that the mortar of citizenship which binds a nation together is laid, have begun programs of ethnic studies. By so doing they attempt to provide mechanisms for cross-cultural and, ultimately, general human understanding.

It is no secret that residential patterns in this country are such that we are, by and large, a land that is segregated along lines of color and culture. This places a heavy burden upon the schools of a nation whose ideals are stated in democratic terms. Liberty, justice, and equality of opportunity are values which should encompass the total of a culturally diverse population. If imbalances exist in the broader society, a school committed to these values must endeavor, as best it can, to correct this by producing in its students a regard for the rights of others and a desire that these values be upheld.

Many schools are accepting this burden by, among other things, providing curricula aimed at understanding our nation through knowledge of its peoples. It is reasoned that without such programs, and in the absence of direct cross-cultural contact, it would be difficult for our young people to come to know and appreciate the qualities and contributions of each of the ethnic groups represented in our society.

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populations of ten thousand or more were
in the area of ethnic studies, the 715 school
districts in the nation which serve student
2001 -3000
4001 -5000
6001 - 7000
8001 -9000
9001 - 10,000

More than 10,000 c

Table 1. Length of Operation of Programs of Districts
Reporting Ethnic Studies Curricula (N = 288)

Table 2. Students Participating in Programs of Districts
Reporting Ethnic Studies Curricula (N = 288)

Most Programs Are New

In an effort to discover just what the
school districts of the United States are doing
in the area of ethnic studies, the 715 school
districts in the nation which serve student
populations of ten thousand or more were
surveyed. This research was conducted during
the spring and summer of 1974 with partial
support provided by the Department of
Educational Studies and Services at

Table 3. Extent and Type of Community Involvement in
Programs of Districts Reporting Ethnic Studies
Curricula (N = 288)

Table 4. Cultural Groups Studied by Districts Reporting
Ethnic Studies Curricula (N = 288)

Bloomsburg State College (Pennsylvania)
and with the assistance of the Computer
Services Center at that institution.

Of the 715 school districts surveyed, 288
or 40% reported having ethnic studies curri-
cula. By and large, those districts having
ethnic studies curricula have not had them
long. 81.7% of the programs have been in
operation for five years or less, with the
average at slightly under four years. This
Corresponds to the 4.2% which have been
engaged in ethnic studies for ten years or
more (see Table 1).

The number of students per district partici-
Bing in the ethnic studies programs shows
great variation. 10.4% of the districts
have fewer than 100 students involved while
19.4% have more than 10,000 participating.
The average number of students per district
engaged in ethnic studies is 3,370, although
the median figure of 950 is considerably
lower (see Table 2).

A large proportion (80.9%) report com-
munity involvement of some type in their
ethnic studies programs (see Table 3). The
types of community involvement include:
the use of community resources (74.7%);
the use of human resources in the community
(69.8%); interaction with community orga-
nizations (55.2%); community involvement
in curriculum planning (41.4%); study of
the community (40.3%); and a community
based instructional program (16%).
Black Americans are the most widely studied cultural group in school districts reporting ethnic studies programs. 92% of these districts include Blacks in their ethnic studies curricula (see Table 4). The next two most widely studied groups are Mexican Americans (70.5%) and Native Americans (67%).

Ethnic studies in the public school districts of the United States having student populations of 10,000 or more most often concern themselves with the history of the cultural group studied. While 94.8% include history in their ethnic studies curricula, 82.6% delve into social customs, and 71.5% examine the relationships between culture and personality (see Table 5).

The results of this survey reveal that the major growth in the adoption of ethnic studies curricula among schools serving student populations of 10,000 or more has occurred in the past five years. The bulk of these programs was begun between 1969 and 1972, with fewer programs being initiated in the past two years. With only 40% of the 715 school districts queried reporting ethnic studies curricula, it is important that these declining figures do not represent a trend.

Also, in only a small proportion of the districts queried are all or most of the student populations touched by ethnic studies. If we are to gain an understanding of the ways of living of the peoples who populate our land and come to appreciate the contributions made by each of these groups, a broader proportion of our students should come into contact with information and experiences pertaining to our diverse cultures.

Community Enrichment

A large proportion of the survey respondents reach into their communities and the communities of others for enrichment. This, of course, is the logical extension of curricula which focus on people. Going to the people for involvement in curriculum building, utilizing the attributes of those in the community who wish to participate, bringing students into the community and the community into the school, breathes life and humanity into the programs.

The population data in Table 4 lend credence to the statement that we are a nation of minorities. It follows that ethnic studies, if they are to provide understanding which is national in scope, should, during a child's twelve years of schooling, deal with all ethnic groups whether represented in the local community or not.

Time is, of course, limited and the emphasis upon ethnic history by school districts offering ethnic studies curricula is defensible. Knowledge of how and why ethnic groups came or were brought to this land and resultant settlement patterns provides a foundation for understanding the values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of today. Most schools engaged in ethnic studies appear to provide a broad sociocultural view as well. Although there is a growing body of data on the cultural foundations of kinesics and dialect, these data are fairly new.

It appears that among our largest school districts there is a core of concern for inter-ethnic understanding as exemplified by the inclusion of ethnic studies in their curricula. Some seem to be committed to the inclusion of a broad scope of the peoples of the United States in their programs. Many districts afford students the opportunity to deal with the historical and sociocultural issues involved. The tragedy is that the core of concern represents an apparent minority of the school districts serving student populations of ten thousand or more and that these programs have been so long in coming.