

# THE IMPLICATIONS OF ETHNICITY FOR CURRICULUM REFORM<sup>1</sup>

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**"The major goal of the curriculum should be to help the individual to function effectively within the common culture, his or her ethnic culture, and other ethnic cultures." Between two extreme approaches, a promising way toward this goal is indicated.**

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SCHOOL districts throughout the nation, stimulated by social forces and supported by private and public agencies, are implementing a wide variety of curricular reforms related to pluralism and ethnicity in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Many of these reform efforts lack clear goals and objectives. There is widespread disagreement and confusion about what these reform efforts should be designed to attain and about the proper relationship which should exist between the

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<sup>2</sup> David E. Washburn. "Ethnic Studies in the United States." *Educational Leadership* 32 (6): 409-12; March 1975.

school and the ethnic identities and attachments of students. Educators and social scientists who embrace divergent ideologies are recommending conflicting school and curricular programs.<sup>3</sup>

Two major ideologies, the *cultural pluralist* and the *assimilationist*, are evident in most theoretical discussions on ethnicity in the United States. I will describe the major assumptions and arguments of these ideologies and their limitations as guides to curriculum reform. I will then present an eclectic ideological position which reflects both major ideologies but avoids their extremes, and argue that it can best guide educational policy and curricular reform.

It is very important for the reader to realize that the ideological positions that I will describe are ideal types in the Weberian

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the curricular reforms recommended by: Barbara A. Sizemore. "Social Science and Education for a Black Identity." In: James A. Banks and Jean D. Grambs, editors. *Black Self-Concept: Implications for Education and Social Science*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972. pp. 141-70; and those recommended by: Nathan Glazer. "Ethnicity and the Schools." *Commentary*, September 1974.

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**“The pluralist-assimilationist believes that the curriculum should reflect the cultures of various ethnic groups and the common culture.”**

sense. The views of no particular writer or theorist can be accurately described by either of the two major positions in their ideal forms. However, various views on ethnicity and pluralism can be roughly classified using a continuum which has the two ideologies, in their ideal forms, at the extreme ends.

### The Cultural Pluralist Ideology

The cultural pluralist ideology, in varying forms, is being widely articulated by

writers today.<sup>4</sup> Some writers, such as Charles V. Hamilton and Stokely Carmichael, endorse a “strong” version of pluralism, while writers such as Michael Novak and Robert L. Williams endorse a much “weaker” form of cultural pluralism.<sup>5</sup> The pluralist argues that ethnicity and ethnic identities are very important in American society. The United States, according to the pluralist, is made up of competing ethnic groups, each of which

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: “Toward Cultural Pluralism.” *Educational Leadership* Volume 32, Number 3; December 1974. A special issue.

<sup>5</sup> Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*. New York: Vintage Books, 1967; Michael Novak. “Cultural Pluralism for Individuals: A Social Vision.” Paper delivered at the Pluralism in a Democratic Society Conference, New York, New York, April 4, 1975; Robert L. Williams. “Moderator Variables as Bias in Testing Black Children.” *The Journal of Afro-American Issues* 3: 77-90; Winter 1975.



Photo courtesy of Gwendolyn C. Baker.

These students in Ann Arbor, Michigan, are learning Swahili in a “Fingertip Multiethnic Experience.”

champions its economic and political interests. It is extremely important, argues the pluralist, for the individual to develop a commitment to his or her ethnic group, especially if that ethnic group is "oppressed" by more powerful ethnic groups within American society. The energies and skills of each

member of an ethnic group are needed to help in that group's liberation struggle. Each individual member of an ethnic group has a moral obligation to join the liberation struggle. The pluralist also assumes that an ethnic group can attain inclusion and full participation within a society only when it can bargain

<b>The Cultural Pluralist Ideology</b>	<b>The Pluralist-Assimilationist Ideology</b>	<b>The Assimilationist Ideology</b>
Separatism	Open society biculturalism	Total integration
Primordial particularistic	Universalized primordialism	Universalistic
Minority emphasis	Minorities and majorities have rights	Majoritarian emphasis
Group rights are primary	Limited rights for the group and the individual	Individual rights are primary
Common ancestry and heritage unifies	Ethnic attachments and ideology of common civic culture compete for allegiances of individuals	Ideology of the common culture unifies
<i>Research Assumption</i> Ethnic minority cultures in the United States are well ordered, highly structured, but different (language, values, behavior, etc.).	<i>Research Assumption</i> Ethnic minority cultures in the United States have some unique cultural characteristics. However, minority and majority groups share many cultural traits, values, and behavior styles.	<i>Research Assumption</i> Subcultural groups which have characteristics which make its members function unsuccessfully in the common culture are deprived, pathological, and lack needed functional characteristics.
Cultural difference research model	Bicultural research model	Social pathology research model and/or genetic research model
Minorities have unique learning styles	Minorities have some unique learning styles, but share many learning characteristics with other groups	Human learning styles and characteristics are universal
<i>Curriculum</i> Use materials and teaching styles which are culture specific. The goal of the curriculum should be to help the child to function more successfully within his or her own ethnic culture and help to liberate his or her ethnic group from oppression.	<i>Curriculum</i> The curriculum should respect the ethnicity of the child and make use of it in positive ways. The goal of the curriculum should be to help the child to learn how to function effectively within the common culture, his or her ethnic culture, and other ethnic cultures.	<i>Curriculum</i> Use materials and teaching styles which are related to the common culture. The curriculum should help the child to develop a commitment to the common civic culture and its idealized ideologies, for example, the American Creed.
<i>Teachers</i> Minority students need skilled teachers of their same race and ethnicity for role models, to learn more effectively, and to develop more positive self-concepts and identities.	<i>Teachers</i> Students need skilled teachers who are very knowledgeable about and sensitive to their ethnic cultures and cognitive styles.	<i>Teachers</i> A skilled teacher who is familiar with learning theories and is able to implement those theories effectively is a good teacher for any group of students, regardless of their ethnicity, race, or social class. The goal should be to train good teachers of children.

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Figure 1. Ideologies Related to Ethnicity and Pluralism in the United States

from a powerful position and when it has "closed ranks" within.<sup>6</sup>

Pluralists, because of their assumptions about the importance of the ethnic group in the lives of students, believe that the curriculum should be drastically revised so that it will reflect the cognitive styles, cultures, and aspirations of ethnic groups, especially the "visible" minorities. The pluralist argues that learning materials should be culture-specific and that the major goal of the curriculum should be to help the child to function more

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successfully within his or her ethnic culture. The curriculum should stress events from the points of view of specific ethnic groups and promote ethnic attachments and allegiances. It should also help students to gain the skills and commitments which will enable them to help their ethnic group to gain power and to exercise it within the larger civic culture.

### The Assimilationist Ideology

The assimilationist feels that the pluralist greatly exaggerates the extent of cultural differences within American society. The assimilationist tends to see ethnicity and ethnic attachments as fleeting and temporary within an increasingly modernized world. Ethnicity, argues the assimilationist, wanes or disappears under the impact of modernization and industrialization. The assimilationist sees the modernized state as being universalistic rather than characterized by ethnic pluralism and believes that strong ethnic attachments are dysfunctional within a modernized democratic state. Ethnicity, argues the assimilationist, promotes divisions, exhumes ethnic conflicts, and leads to the balkanization of society.

The assimilationist believes that the best way to promote the goals of American society

<sup>6</sup> Carmichael and Hamilton, *op. cit.*

and to develop commitments to the ideals of American democracy is to promote the full socialization of all individuals and groups into the common civic culture. Every society, argues the assimilationist, has values, ideologies, and norms which each member of that society must develop commitments to if it is to function successfully and smoothly. In the United States, these values are embodied in the American Creed and in such documents as the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. In each society there is also a set of common skills and abilities which every successful member of society should master. In our nation these include speaking and writing Standard English and learning basic reading and computational skills. The primary goal of the school, like other publicly supported institutions, should be to socialize individuals into the common culture and enable them to function more successfully within it. At best, the school should take a position of "benign neutrality" in matters related to the ethnic attachments of its students.<sup>7</sup> If ethnicity and ethnic attachments are to be promoted, this should be done by private institutions like the church, the community club, and the private school.

### A Critique of the Cultural Pluralist and the Assimilationist Ideologies

The pluralist ideology is useful because it informs us about the importance of ethnicity within our nation and the extent to which an individual's ethnic group determines his or her life chances in American society. However, the pluralist exaggerates the extent of cultural pluralism within American society and fails to give adequate attention to the fact that gross cultural, if not structural, assimilation has taken place in American society.<sup>8</sup> Exaggerating the extent of cultural differences between and among ethnic groups might be as detrimental for

<sup>7</sup> Nathan Glazer makes this argument in: "Cultural Pluralism: The Social Aspect." Paper delivered at the Pluralism in a Democratic Society Conference, New York, New York, April 4, 1975.

<sup>8</sup> Milton Gordon. *Assimilation in American Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.

school policy and curricular reform as ignoring those which are real.

The assimilationist argues that the school should socialize youths into the common culture and help them to attain the skills which they need to become effective and contributing members of the nation state. It is very important for curriculum developers to realize that most societies expect the common schools to help socialize youths so that they will become productive members of the nation state and develop strong commitments to the idealized national values. Curriculum developers should keep the broad idealized national goals in mind when they reform the curriculum in the common schools. These goals include human dignity, equality, and justice. However, the assimilationist makes a number of questionable assumptions which often hinder the success of minority youths.<sup>9</sup> When assimilationists talk about the "common culture," most often they mean the Anglo-American culture and are ignoring the reality that the United States is made up of many different ethnic groups, each of which has some unique cultural characteristics that are integral parts of the American common culture. The curriculum builder should seriously examine the "common culture" concept and make sure that the view of the American common culture which is perpetuated in the schools is not racist, ethnocentric, or exclusive, but is multiethnic and reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity in American life. We need to redefine what the common culture actually is and make sure that our new definition reflects the social realities, and not the myths, within this nation.

### The Pluralist-Assimilationist Ideology

Since neither the cultural pluralist nor the assimilationist ideology can adequately guide curriculum reform in the common schools, we need a different ideology which reflects both of these positions and yet avoids

<sup>9</sup> For an informed critique of the assimilationist ideology see: Andrew Greeley. *Ethnicity in the United States: A Preliminary Reconnaissance*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1974.

their extremes. We also need an ideology which is more consistent with the realities of American society. We might call this position the *pluralist-assimilationist* ideology and imagine that it is found near the center of our continuum, which has the cultural pluralist and the assimilationist ideologies at the extreme ends (see Figure 1).

The pluralist-assimilationist feels that the cultural pluralist exaggerates the importance of the ethnic group in the socialization of the individual and that the assimilationist greatly understates the role of ethnicity in modern American life. The pluralist-assimilationist assumes that while the ethnic group and the ethnic community are very important in the socialization of individuals, individuals are strongly influenced by the common culture during their early socialization, even if they never leave the ethnic community or enclave.<sup>10</sup> Thus, concludes the pluralist-assimilationist, while ethnic groups have some unique cultural characteristics, all groups in America share many cultural traits.

The pluralist-assimilationist believes that the curriculum should reflect the cultures of various ethnic groups *and* the common culture. Students need to study all of these cultures in order to become effective participants and decision makers in a modernized democratic society. The school curriculum should respect the ethnic attachments of students and make use of them in positive ways. However, the students should be given options regarding their political choices and the actions which they take regarding their ethnic attachments. The major goal of the curriculum should be to help the individual to function effectively within the common culture, his or her ethnic culture, and other ethnic cultures. The policy implications of the cultural pluralist ideology and the assimilationist ideology are extreme and inconsistent with the goals of a modernized democratic society. The pluralist-assimilationist ideology can best guide curricular reform in the nation's schools. □

<sup>10</sup> Charles A. Valentine. "Deficit, Differences, and Bicultural Models of Afro-American Behavior." *Harvard Educational Review* 41: 137-57; May 1971.

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