

# Cultural Diversity: Strength of the Nation

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*The Bicentennial celebration can help us to reevaluate our responses to cultural diversity and to build on these valuable strengths for a more equitable future.*

**T**HE Bicentennial celebration of our nation's founding will have different meanings for different individuals and various groups of citizens throughout the country. For some, it may mean a time for reflection—a time to strengthen national sentiment and to refurbish a sense of pride. Refurbishing may require an assessment of our historic past. It may imply a review of the nation's accomplishments with the hope that the future will be even more productive.

Productivity for some will be based upon the continued success of the technological and economic progress of the country. For this group of citizens, little in the past has prevented them from reaping the benefits of our society. For them, individual security and freedom as well as national solidarity and stability are not a dream but a reality. For others, the celebration will not encourage reflection based upon pride but will set the stage for a painful and perhaps shameful recall of what our country's history and development have meant to and for them. For this, our nation is responsible. Far too many have been prohibited from enjoying the freedom and other benefits pro-

vided by this great nation, prohibited from full participation because of a difference in culture.

However, there can be hope for our country's future if we use the Bicentennial celebration as a time for recognizing the importance of cultural diversity as a means for the survival and continued successful development of our nation. Discovering the strength of our nation through our diverse ethnic and cultural populations could guarantee hope for full participation of all citizens. A positive assessment of our culturally diverse society could promote and help us to develop a more humane nation.

## History of Diversity

A review of the past will show us that our attitudes toward diversity have been inconsistent. To the immigrant, the country offered a chance to become a citizen, to participate, and to be "an American." This chance, however, was based on the immigrant's ability or willingness to relinquish original ethnic or cultural identities and conform to the customs and ways of life now found in their new home. The pot was hot, eager, and ready to melt the newcomer.

History tells us that the melting pot

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theory suggests that America offered everyone, regardless of one's origins, a new culture and a new way of life. Yet, in fact, not all persons who emigrated to America were willing to merge together and forge one new identity. Some groups retained their original customs, language, religion, and loyalty to past homelands. During the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, ethnicity was regarded as “un-American.”<sup>1</sup> From the beginning of this nation's history, there was little tolerance for and certainly no acceptance of ethnic and/or cultural differences. While some new arrivals had a choice and could have, if they so desired, joined the mainstream, there were some for whom the invitation to be assimilated was never extended. If there was little tolerance for the ethnic immigrant, there was absolutely no consideration for those who could not be categorized as immigrants.

It was perhaps beyond the conception of our founders that Blacks could become true Americans. Persons of African descent were viewed as being either so powerful or so physically unacceptable that their assimilation became entirely impossible, or was so insignificant that it became entirely undesirable. In the late eighteenth century, Americanization was a precious commodity to be cherished and enjoyed only by a select group of persons of European descent.<sup>2</sup>

Recently there has been a change in the

<sup>1</sup> James F. Maguire, S.J. “Introduction.” In: John Hope Franklin, Thomas F. Pettigrew, and Raymond W. Mack. *Ethnicity in American Life*. New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1971. p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> John Hope Franklin. “Ethnicity in American Life: The Historical Perspective.” In: John Hope Franklin, Thomas F. Pettigrew, and Raymond W. Mack. *Ethnicity in American Life*. New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1971. pp. 9-21.

attitudes toward diversity; most of this change has occurred during the past decade. The activities of black Americans during the 1960's have contributed more to the change in attitudes toward ethnicity and cultural differences than any other event or set of events in our history. The development of racial, ethnic, and cultural pride by black Americans has helped to pave the way for other ethnic and cultural groups collectively to develop and support pride in their own diverse cultures. The climate of the 70's is more conducive for expressions and understanding of diversity than ever before. If we are to take advantage of cultural differences and use these differences to build a stronger nation, it is necessary for schools to become involved in this process.

## Schools and Diversity

For the purpose of focusing on the schools and how schools can promote diversity, I will refer from this point to “multicultural education” and its implications for curricular concerns.

First, however, it is important that we explore the meaning of multiculturalism. Ethnicity is an important aspect of multiculturalism but should not be viewed as an entity in itself. Ethnicity or, more appropriately, multiethnicity can be viewed as a part of multiculturalism. Multiethnicity is that portion of multiculturalism that refers primarily to ethnic content—the content that describes the historical, economic, political, social, and psychological involvement of ethnic groups or of a single ethnic group. It is convenient to broaden our scope from ethnic groups and proceed to a larger concept of cultural groups; this allows us to include many groups in our society that cannot be included in an ethnic category.

It is possible to examine and study various ethnic groups from a multiethnic perspective without involving cultural groups. However, from my point of view, multiculturalism cannot be analyzed or defined without the inclusion of ethnicity. For example, women and religious groups cannot or should not be thought of as ethnic groups but may

be viewed as cultural groups. The study of women and religious groups as well as a myriad of other cultural groups can best be understood when the ethnic components and/or experiences are also analyzed. A study of women or religious groups in the United States should explore the relationship between various or specific ethnic groups and these cultural groups. Ethnicity is a large portion of what is studied in the larger realm of culture.

Ethnic groups may be studied independently; but without reference to the implications ethnicity has for the broader cultural aspects of our society, the study will offer little. To illustrate, women or the feminist movement may be explored, but the full impact of this movement will be ignored completely unless we consider the interests, concerns, and responses to the issues involved by women of various ethnic groups. The value and interests a black, Native Amer-

ican, or Chicano woman places on the feminist movement are quite different from those of a white middle-class woman. The differences in perspectives and/or responses are primarily due to the ethnic experiences each has had in this country.

Multiculturalism allows individuals to support, if they so choose, one or more cultures. It encourages the freedom of individuals to maintain the lifestyles, values, and beliefs of a selected ethnic group and at the same time encourages the maintenance of yet another culture. The other culture may be referred to as the "common culture." The common culture is that which we all embrace as citizens of this country. An important aspect of multiculturalism is that it does give the individual an option to support an additional culture or cultures.

Multicultural education is then the process by which we prepare students for supporting and understanding multicultural-

These children in Ann Arbor, Michigan, are baking Jewish bread as part of a multicultural education program.



ism and therefore diversity. The educational process involved is encompassing and should include all aspects of the school environment.

### **Curricular Implications**

For the purpose of this discussion, curriculum is considered to be all of the activities for which a school is responsible.<sup>3</sup> This indicates that in planning for multicultural education, we must consider nonacademic as well as the academic components of curriculum. A total approach will require training and involvement of all school personnel.

In-service education is a crucial consideration when educators begin to plan and design programs that will foster the understanding and appreciation of diversity in schools. Far too often, in-service education programs are planned with little regard for what is to be accomplished. Defined objectives and guidelines should be the first step in planning. What is it that the participants need in order to teach multicultural concepts? How best can these needs be met and under what conditions? Planning should focus over a three to five year span, building on objectives, experiences, and progress.

Consideration should also be given to what persons will receive the training. Administrators in most systems will need similar, if not the same, kinds of exposure and training as teachers. When the total school environment is to be included, supportive training must also be planned and involve nonteaching personnel. Parents, secretaries, custodians, bus drivers, para-professionals, and others are all important in the process of educating children. The training will not be identical for all persons but should be planned around a framework designed to enhance cultural education. Only when a total approach to in-service education is taken can schools begin to plan for the education of children in an integrated manner.

Cultural understanding must be integrated into all aspects of the school's pro-

gram. The recognition and fostering of diversity is just as important in planning lunch menus, school parties, and extracurricular activities as it is in planning social studies and science programs. Multicultural education must be viewed as a total approach if the goals inherent in this concept are to be realized.

Once school personnel have developed attitudes and behavior that are supportive of diversity, the task of planning for classroom instruction will be easier to accomplish. It should be kept in mind, however, that all of the learning experiences and instruction should incorporate as well as integrate ethnic and cultural content throughout the total curriculum. There is little need for teachers to be concerned about giving equal time to the study of ethnic groups if an integrated and total approach is used.

Ethnic and cultural content should be included and incorporated into instruction at every level and in all subject areas when and where appropriate. This may mean that while several ethnic groups may be involved in a study of the development of the Southwest, only one or two might receive concentrated attention in a study of the development of transportation. The extent to which a group or groups are included in an area of study will depend not only on the participation of a group but also on the teacher's awareness of the participation and involvement of specific ethnic and cultural groups. This awareness has implications for our earlier discussion of in-service training. Training must help to develop attitudes and behavior supportive of diversity and must also provide knowledge and information that will help teachers become more intelligent and knowledgeable about ethnic and cultural content.

The impact of our Bicentennial celebration can be felt if each one of us as educators assumes the responsibility for making an effort to reevaluate our past performance in light of our responses to diversity. Reevaluate and plan now for discovering how valuable cultural diversity is to us as a nation and what building on this strength can mean to our country in the future. □

<sup>3</sup> Edmund C. Short and George D. Marconnit. *Contemporary Thought on Public School Curriculum*. Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown Company, 1968. p. 7.

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