

# Fostering a Commitment to Cultural Pluralism

William C. Miller

*An advocate of cultural pluralism underscores the need for racial and ethnic diversity in predominantly white suburban schools.*



*From the filmstrip series, With Pride to Progress: The Minority Child (Set 3, "The Chicano Child"), produced by Parents' Magazine Films, Inc.*

Now—right now, some couple—a white couple—is packing the family's belongings and moving . . . moving from a "changing" neighborhood to what is seen as the security of an all-white area, most likely a suburb. And when the move is over, when the family is unpacked and the child has gone off to the all-white school and is sitting in an all-white classroom—the parents, at least for the moment, feel relieved. They feel safe—secure in the climate of isolated splendor they have created for their child. Then they read in their newspaper about a judge's decision and they look at a map and they see that a wider circle may be drawn and they realize that they may not have made good their escape.

Do they get out their suitcases and start packing again? Many have. They have done so, more to escape from rather than reach out for something. They have done so in the hope of isolating themselves from people who are different. Deep down, they know it is a temporary escape. They know the world's population is moving upward to the five billion mark and that whites are, in the world sense, a minority group. They must know their children will grow up, work, live in a world made up of people who are ethnically, culturally, and racially different. Yet they keep packing their suitcases. Is there no better way? Can the suburban students of today be provided with experiences that will enable them in the future to act realistically, rationally, and constructively toward people who are different?



The curriculum contains a unit on American Indians but it fails to examine the plight of the modern "first American." The history textbook ignores the contributions of minority groups in the building of our nation. The audiovisual material used is factually inaccurate and supports stereotypes. True? Certainly. It is true in most American schools, but in suburbia there is another important factor that contributes to the student's limited look at the past and present nature of our world. This factor is that all the faces in the classroom are white. In fact, it is likely that where the child lives—where the child plays, shops, and attends religious services—no real contact will be made with individuals who are different from the child in an ethnic, racial, or cultural sense.



From the filmstrip series, *With Pride to Progress* (Set 1, "The Black Child"), produced by Parents' Magazine Films, Inc.

We hear much about how we need to emphasize ethnic or racial contributions to enhance the self-concept and sense of identity of minority groups. We need also to consider how vital the need is for suburban children to know and appreciate the world beyond the suburbs—the *real* world. From a world view, the white individual is in a distinct minority. Although many white families sleep in the suburbs, the city is the place in which most wage earners work. The major cities are rapidly becoming black.

The basic conclusion of the Kerner report was that "... our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal."<sup>1</sup> The report continued:

To pursue our present course will involve the continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values.

The alternative is not blind repression or capitulation to lawlessness. It is the realization of common opportunities for all within a single society.<sup>2</sup>

The Kerner report also states:

This deepening racial division is not inevitable. The movement apart can be reversed. Choice is still possible. Our principal task is to define that choice and to press for a national resolution.<sup>3</sup>

The black-white split is not the only division. Attention must be given to all minority-majority relationships.

### Cultural Pluralism Promotes Self-Interest

In many suburban communities, a premium seems to be placed on "sameness." People strive to be like their neighbors. This can be seen in dress, hair styles, and the appearance of the homes. If homogeneous color of skin is a goal, the accomplishment may be close at hand. Toffler reports in *Future Shock* that:

Given our new, fast-accumulating knowledge of genetics, we shall be able to breed whole races of blue people—or, for that matter, green, purple, or orange. In a world still suffering from the moral lesion of racism, this is a thought to be conjured with. Should we strive for a world in which all people share the same skin color? If we want that, we shall no doubt have the technical means for bringing it about.<sup>4</sup>

However, one committed to the concept of cultural pluralism must take the view that we should encourage, prize, and support differences, not strive for uniformity. The learning experiences of all our youth must build appreciation

<sup>1</sup> National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*. New York: Bantam Books, 1968. p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Alvin Toffler. *Future Shock*. New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1971. p. 201. Copyright © 1971. Reprinted with permission of Random House, Inc.

of the value of diversity. If they do not, it will be costly to us—costly in strife and unrest in our nation and costly in loss of creativity and productivity.

Obviously, we are handicapping suburban children by presenting them with a version of the world and of their country that is far from reality. We have a highly mobile population and, to an increasing degree, suburbs are becoming desegregated. Many industries are internationalizing. Today's children, as they grow up, will have much more interaction with a variety of peoples. If schools are to equip youngsters for life, children need to know, understand, and be able to interact effectively with individuals who are culturally and ethnically different from themselves.

Our suburban students need these understandings and they need to be prepared to come to grips with the challenge of the Kerner report. They need to do this not only to recognize the role and rights of minorities, but also to ensure their *own* welfare and the survival of our nation.

### Correcting Curriculum Inaccuracies

If one were to believe the textbooks, American history and culture is colorless. The contributions of the thousands of members of minority groups are not told. The heroic feats of the American Indian, the bravery of the black Civil War soldier, the role of the Mexican American and Oriental in opening and building the West are often not presented. Knowledge of the many ways in which non-whites have contributed to the scientific, industrial, and cultural growth of America is not available, for the most part, to today's student.

Other omissions also distort the student's view of America. The broken promises of the government in its relations with the Indians, and the past and present ethnic prejudices and racist practices of government, industry, and business are not dealt with.

Also, materials that present racial and ethnic stereotypes and misconceptions are common. Such materials must be eliminated, not only because of their inaccuracy but also because of their impact on student attitudes and understandings.

Our country's history cannot be truly understood if one has only the white perception of



America's development. An illustration is the more balanced view one has of American history after reading the Indian version in such books as *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*.<sup>5</sup> In our nation's growth, all ethnic groups reacted to and were influenced by the actions of other parties. What is vitally needed is a curriculum that completely and accurately presents the influences and contributions of all to our nation.

A committee appointed by the Michigan Department of Education advocates the following

<sup>5</sup> Dee Brown. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1971. 458 pp.

as general concepts upon which a curriculum should be based:

1. The society in which we live is multi-ethnic.
2. The American people are a product of the successive and continuing interaction among ethnic groups, beginning with the original inhabitants.
3. Similarities and differences are a basic condition of American life.
4. The individual in American society has the resource of ethnicity as a basis for the realization of self-worth.
5. The school as an educational institution is the prime vehicle for the realization of these principles.<sup>6</sup>

### Enriching Learning

Few would disagree that schools need to be better—more exciting, more relevant. The study of different cultures and ethnic groups can help to make the curriculum more vital.

Knowing the historical biography of various minority groups is important, but studies of cultural pluralism must go beyond this initial stage. It is essential that the suburban student know each culturally different person as he *lives*—how he thinks, why he believes as he does, what he values. Attention must be given to folklore, music, religion—to all the factors that make a culture. It is easy to see that the curriculum will be enriched when we read the literature, sing the songs, dance the dances, observe the customs, and learn some of the languages of ethnic groups. When minority value structures are examined (hopefully, with and through the experience of members of minority groups), we will have reached a high level of curriculum enrichment. We may be able to foster empathetic understanding. We may be able to help students get inside another individual's intellectual and emotional skin.

Understanding ourselves and the world in which we live is a major concern of all of us, including students. Making intelligent decisions about how to live and deciding what actions to take to improve social conditions presents important and relevant issues for study. Many of

these issues relate to interactions with and roles of minority groups in our society. Through understanding the concept of cultural pluralism, the student will be helped to understand the loss our American society has suffered because of

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discrimination toward minorities. Students need to be prepared to make decisions about social issues. Dealing with these questions *now* will help students be more effective citizens and it will help make education interesting and relevant. Suburban students who gain appreciation of the history and culture of a minority group may also come to recognize how the group had been isolated from the mainstream of America. They will be aware that the group's contributions have not been fully recognized. Students will then appreciate, at least to a small degree, how this isolation has led to alienation.

### Encouraging An Interdisciplinary Approach

Because understanding of self is so important, we need to know and use the discipline of anthropology as a resource. Kluckhohn says: "Anthropology holds up a great mirror to man and lets him look at himself in his infinite variety."<sup>7</sup> Often, we can look at ourselves more accurately from the perspective of another culture. At present, white adults and students are strongly and inaccurately ethnocentric.

Recognizing that all peoples have a history and that each ethnic group has made a unique contribution to the world can be an exciting con-

<sup>6</sup>Committee on Cultural Democracy. *Cultural Democracy*. Report of the 1970-71 Michigan Project, Improving State Leadership in Education. Lansing, Michigan: Michigan Department of Education, March 1971. 23 pp.

<sup>7</sup>Clyde Kluckhohn. *Mirror for Man*. Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1965. p. 19.

## Promoting Cultural Pluralism in Suburban Schools

There is no step-by-step or universal plan to be used by suburban schools as they implement the concept of cultural pluralism, notes author William C. Miller. However, the following are several approaches that Miller believes schools should consider:

- Provide in-service experiences for all existing staff (certificated and non-certificated employees). Help employees examine and improve their knowledge of and attitudes toward minorities. If children are to take on new behavior, they must see those qualities modeled in the adults they have contact with. Don't forget to include the board of education in growth experiences.

- Hire staff who represent different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Work with the board of education to examine the current makeup of staff and to devise a plan for recruiting new and more culturally diverse individuals.

- Examine existing instructional materials. Develop and implement a procedure to "retire" material that is not fair or representative. Secure supplementary material that will correct present omissions and in-

accuracies. Establish a step in the approval process for new materials guaranteeing that all items meet the criteria of proper treatment of and appropriate inclusion of representatives of racial and ethnic groups. Refuse all other material and tell the publisher why!

- Initiate intensive curriculum revision efforts aimed at including the concept of cultural pluralism at all grade levels and in all content areas.

- Establish mini-courses and optional programs focusing on pluralistic ideas that will augment the current curriculum.

- Provide shared learning experiences in which children with different cultural backgrounds become acquainted as "pen pals," and then undertake an area of study that involves meeting together to work on a common problem or assignment.

- Establish an exchange program of teachers and students with a school district that has a large proportion of students with different ethnic backgrounds. This could be a short-term arrangement or a long-term commitment, by which the visiting student lives with a local family. Make sure the exchange is a two-way affair.

cept to students, who may be awakened and motivated to examine their own family histories. In speaking of the awakening of interest in his own cultural history, Michael Novak, writing in *Harper's*, tells of a strange discovery:

Odd that I should have such shallow knowledge of my roots. Amazing to me that I do not know what my family suffered, endured, learned, hoped these past six or seven generations. It is as if there were no project on which we all have been involved. As if history, in some way, began with my father and with me.<sup>8</sup>

Anyone with any degree of ethnic background often feels that through an examination of history and culture one's life can be enhanced. Many individuals feel that such understanding may bring them closer to their past and to others, and add meaning to their lives.

James Banks points out that:

While the teacher should help children to see and understand the cultural differences within our society, students should also become aware of the many ways in which all human groups are alike. All human cultures have families, power relationships, a division between male and female roles, and ways of resolving problems of scarcity. However, these cultural elements often take diverse forms. Nevertheless, the teacher should not emphasize differences to the neglect of important similarities in human cultures. Students should know how closely they are related to all human groups—both biologically and culturally.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Michael Novak. "White Ethnic." *Harper's Magazine*; September 1971. p. 44. Copyright © 1971 by Michael Novak. Reprinted by permission of Curtis Brown Ltd.

<sup>9</sup> James A. Banks. "Teaching Ethnic Minority Studies with a Focus on Culture." *Educational Leadership* 29(2): 113-17; November 1971.

This feeling of "oneness" can be a powerful force in helping to prepare students to work more effectively to establish domestic and world peace.

By understanding, accepting, and *glorifying* in the diverse ways that humans have evolved various cultures, individuals can better understand themselves and can more completely and "authentically" value others. In these "pressure cooker" times, helping to develop authentic human beings is one of education's greatest challenges. An authentic person is one who is a fully functioning individual, "in tune" with his or her world. Such persons know who they are, and where they are going. They have good relationships and rich, deep satisfactions. To become authentic, we all desperately need to understand ourselves, our culture, our neighbors, our country, and the world in which we live. Strong commitment by educators to the concept of cultural pluralism can provide the vehicle and the instructional content to help students become more authentic human beings.

### "Opening Up" the Schools

Citizens, parents, students—even educators—feel that schools need to change. The need to be more open, allow more participation, and be more accepting of divergence and diversity is widely recognized. How can these goals be achieved? The way the curriculum can be enriched by a vigorous study of various cultures has already been described. History, music, literature—all aspects of the school program—will become more vital. Since a greater range of resources (including people) will be involved, instructional strategies (such as teacher-pupil planning, role-playing, simulation, inquiry techniques, and community action projects) will become a part of the school program. Emphasis will be placed on studying the values, beliefs, and perceptions of a range of groups.

Students and teachers who look at the world from a pluralistic point of view will be more accepting and will value diversity. For that reason, a wider variety of people will be a part of the school program.

In order to provide appropriate experiences for students, teachers will need to have a more thorough understanding of and respect for cultures

that differ from their own. If such understandings have the humanizing effect earlier described, the concept of cultural pluralism will permeate teacher, administrator, student, and community perceptions. These new perceptions can have an impact on all areas of school and community living. Through the behavior generated by embracing the concept of cultural pluralism, individuals may become more accepting of the many diverse groups that make up our nation. Educators may become more sensitive to different learning styles, differences in abilities, innovative instructional methods, and new forms of school organization and governance.

### Legal and Moral Responsibility

No one will deny that this is a time of alienation and unrest in our country. At the root of this uneasiness is the fact that, for many of our citizens, the promise of America has not been a reality. The concepts of equal opportunity and equal treatment have not been implemented for many members of minority groups. Continued oppression and violent confrontation seem to be our current direction. Our nation's basic documents specify equality, equal protection, and dignity under law.

There are many who say we are already failing as a democracy because we are not fulfilling the pledge made by our Constitution and Bill of Rights. Unless whites become less ethnocentric and more willing and more skillful in recognizing the dignity, worth, and rights of all Americans, we will fail as a human society. The schools have an important role to play in building these understandings and appreciations. Implementing the concept of cultural pluralism can be the educator's contribution to bringing about the vital, needed changes in the curriculum and in our society. [F]



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