ETHNICITY IN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY, COMPETENT CITIZENS MUST VALUE THEIR OWN ETHNICITY AND RELATE TO MEMBERS OF OTHER ETHNIC GROUPS.

For most ethnic groups, acculturation in American society has required negation of the very qualities that are the essence of citizenship—recognition of the value of diverse cultures and a strong sense of self-worth. I am often reminded of the numerous early European immigrants to this country who altered their ethnic surnames to gain acceptance into mainstream America, to increase their opportunities for upward socioeconomic mobility, and to achieve full citizenship rights afforded in our democracy. Historically, the superimposed precondition for acceptable citizenship for Native Americans, Blacks who were brought to this country, Hispanics, and Asians was the painful rejection of their own ethnicity. Those who modified their attitudes and behavior in conformity with white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant (WASP) values were given rewards in the form of limited social, economic, and political opportunities.

The ethnic pride movement led by Blacks in the 1960s, followed by Hispanics, Native Americans, and white ethnic groups, and the immigration of thousands of political refugees have done much to raise America's ethnic consciousness. The importance of ethnicity and social class is also apparent in political campaigns as candidates and their parties lure the Jewish, Black, Hispanic, Polish, Italian, and other sizeable ethnic block votes.

The complexity of American society has made the school's role in citizenship education more difficult and curriculums for citizenship education necessarily more diversified. The key question concerns the extent to which schools are preparing students to function effectively in our polyglot, multiethnic society and pluralistic world. If the aim of education is to develop citizens who are politically, economically, and scientifically literate, then it must include ethnic literacy.

An important aspect of ethnic literacy is development of knowledge about various ethnic groups—their

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values, experiences, and socialization. In education, most of the research and writing on ethnic pluralism have come under the rubrics of ethnic studies and multicultural education. The public sector has contributed such media productions as “Roots” and “Holocaust” fueling the development of ethnic curriculums in the public schools and greater ethnic awareness in the general public. Knowledge about the ethnic backgrounds and current circumstances of various groups in our society brings new meaning to the concept of citizenship. What we know about such media productions as “Roots” brings new meaning to the concept of citizenship. What we know about ethnicity significantly influences public attitudes and policies; over the past decade, this knowledge has gradually become more widespread and accurate.

One of the most effective ways for schools to develop ethnic literacy is to use experiential learning. Rather than relying on predigested textbook material, teachers can have students collect and analyze data about conflicts and events involving their own ethnic groups, those ethnic groups in their communities, or ethnic groups with which they identify in other parts of the world. For example, by studying and comparing relations between gypsies and Czechoslovakians, Arabs and Israelis, and majority and minority groups in the U.S., students are able to develop more accurate perceptions of their own ethnicity and citizenship.

Unfortunately, the available evidence suggests that schools make relatively little use of experiential approaches to learning about ethnicity (Social Science Education Consortium, 1980). Most of what students are taught is based on factual content, specifically, ethnic group contributions to the United States. However, some schools have been successful in developing student perceptions on ethnicity by using comparative analysis and other learning strategies through social inquiry.

I have found that the study of ethnic similarities and differences can lead to greater understanding and appreciation for ethnic pluralism (Ratliff, 1975). As Banks (1978) asserts, “Recognition and legitimization of ethnicity by schools and society is a promising way to increase national cohesion and promote effective citizenship in a pluralistic democratic nation.” Teachers will be more successful in developing ethnic literacy if they are acquainted with anthropological and sociological research on ethnicity and social stratification, but more important, if they learn how to apply such research to their instructional practices. For example, the National Assessment of Social Studies/Citizenship (1978) found that (1) upper socioeconomic class students, despite their ethnicity, displayed motivation for political participation and were more politicized than their lower socioeconomic peers; (2) lower socioeconomic students have a general disaffection for government and political officials; and (3) ethnic minority students generally score far below their nonminority peers on questions measuring political knowledge, political efficacy, and civic tolerance. Teachers who have information such as this are in a position to better understand students’ perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors and how students personally view their own citizenship.

Teachers may be more willing to use experiential learning if staff development programs provide opportunities for them to conduct their own inquiries into the cultures of their students. Thomas Labelle (quoted in Gay, 1980) says, “The teacher must systematically investigate the cultural background of her students in order to comprehend the impact such a background has on the way in which the child perceives the world…” Teachers can correct their students’ and their own misconceptions by acquiring a more thorough understanding of where those students are coming from.

Like other important educational goals, the development of ethnic literacy depends upon commitment. If educators expect students to accept the concept of ethnic pluralism, they must themselves regard it as an essential aspect of citizenship. Schools must promulgate this commitment, for it is fundamental to the wholesome development of the educated citizen. Several state legislatures have mandated the study of ethnic heritage in schools, and Congress continues to appropriate approximately $3 million annually for the Ethnic Heritage Studies Program. This sanction by government of ethnic study should be reflected in the actions of individual educators.

It seems that impersonality pervades our society and the world community. The efforts of young people to attain personal worth, recognition, and acceptance are frequently thwarted. Their frustration leads to self-destructive behavior or behavior against others, especially members of other ethnic groups.* Such expressions of stress are in opposition to the concept of good citizenship. Competent citizens understand themselves, value their ethnicity, and relate positively to other people, regardless of ethnic background and social status.

In conclusion, if the aim of education is to prepare competent citizens who will communicate with, relate to, and interdepend on others who are ethnically diverse, then the teaching and learning of ethnicity must become a priority in citizenship education.

* Educators are concerned by the current Anglocentric recruitment in high schools by such groups as the Neo-Nazi and the Ku Klux Klan. Klan activity has been reported at schools in San Diego, San Bernardino, and Los Angeles, California; Denver; Chicago and Peoria, Illinois; Jeffersonville, Indiana; Hillsborough County, Florida; Oklahoma City; and Tuscaloosa, Decatur, and Birmingham, Alabama. See Education USA 22 (June 1980): 317-322.

References


