

Understanding Diversity

To better prepare children for the complexities of a shrinking world, New York's Department of Education is revising its social studies curriculum to emphasize global studies and the contributions of all ethnic groups to U.S. history.

With the possible exception of abortion, there is no more volatile subject in American life than race. Yet schools throughout the country are forced to deal with its realities and implications every day. What should we be teaching our children about their different ethnic and cultural identities? How do we help them understand that, despite our differences, we are all part of one interdependent society?

There was a time when such questions seemed urgent only in certain, usually urban, pockets of America. Today the urgency is pervasive. We are becoming more ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse. Demographers tell us that by the year 2020 one of every three people in the United States will be what we now call a "minority." According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, more than 600,000 people immigrate to this country annually. In New York City one child in four under the age of ten is the offspring of a non-English-speaking immigrant parent. School districts in New York State serve more than 100,000 students with limited English proficiency, from 85 different language backgrounds.

These numbers are growing at a time when attitudes about diversity

have changed. Not too long ago it wasn't supposed to matter where your forebears came from. What we were about was building a *new* society, where "what you could do" mattered

and not "who you were." Our social ideal was the melting pot; the schools' task was to promote assimilation. As Ellwood P. Cubberly wrote near the turn of the century:

Photograph by J. R. Farbas, Window Rock, Arizona



In July 1987, when a task force reported that New York curriculum materials were "contributing to the miseducation of all young people," they were thinking of the effects of Eurocentric traditions upon minority children such as these Native Americans in Window Rock, Arizona, shown here engaged in learning about his camera from an older student.

Everywhere these people [immigrants] tend to settle in groups or settlements, and to set up here their national manners, customs, and observances. Our task is to break up these groups or settlements, to assimilate and amalgamate these people as a part of our American race, and to implant in their children, so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order, and popular government, and to awaken in them a reverence for our democratic institutions and for those things . . . which we as a people hold to be of abiding worth.¹

Assimilation worked well for many, but not for all. As James Banks has written, it:

shaped a nation from millions of immigrants and from diverse Native American groups and prevented the United States from becoming an ethnically balkanized nation. The assimilationist ideal also worked reasonably well for ethnic peoples who were white. However, . . . [it] has not worked nearly as well for ethnic peoples of color.²

Many people had preferred not to "melt" to begin with, but to maintain their separate identities. Many others, chiefly those of color, found that they weren't allowed to "melt" if they tried—that the positions of power and privilege were denied no matter what. Accordingly, a competing ethic gained strength, that of cultural pluralism, which calls for maintaining cultural identity while participating in the political and economic mainstream.³ Today we must accommodate not only a diversity of origins but a diversity of views.

We are not always dealing well with this diversity. In our schools, the rate of failure is higher among people of color than among whites. In our economy, we are developing a seemingly permanent underclass, skewed by race. In our streets, we tear at each other's vitals—as incidents at places like Howard Beach and Bensonhurst unhappily remind us.

There are many powerful arguments for a more multicultural, multi-ethnic, multilingual curriculum. A society dedicated to liberty and justice for all its people cannot deny justice to some without betraying its ideals. Nor can our economy thrive with a permanently alienated underclass: we must help *all* young people acquire the skills and knowledge they need to function effectively in the workplace.

The child must experience the school as an extension, not a rejection, of home and community.

Furthermore, we live in a small and multicultural world. If we wish to communicate effectively with the majority of the world's peoples—who are not white and who don't speak English—we must know more about how they see the world, how they make sense of experience, why they behave as they do.

Critics ask why we are fretting over multicultural curriculums instead of getting back to the basics. What they miss is the interconnection. They do not understand the students we are trying to reach. If children are to do well academically, school and family and community must work within a context of shared values and expectations; the child must experience the school as an extension, not a rejection, of home and community.

The recent work of two anthropologists, Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu,⁴ is instructive in this regard. A recent *New York Times* article reported:

Many black students perform poorly in high school because of a shared sense that academic success is a sellout to the white world. . . . According to [Fordham and Ogbu's] study, "What appears to have emerged in some segments of the black community is a kind of cultural orientation which defines academic learning in school as 'acting white,' and academic success as a prerogative of white Americans." The study argues that this grows out of the low expectations that white Americans have of blacks, low expectations that have taken root among the blacks themselves.⁵

For all of us, it is impossible to understand our complex society without understanding the history and culture of its major ethnic and cultural components. As Gunnar Myrdal taught us, we cannot understand American

history, nor many of the social and economic phenomena of the present, without understanding the black experience throughout our history.⁶ The same might be said of the Native American experience and the experiences of the various Latino and Asian peoples, as well as of the European and Middle Eastern and other peoples who have shaped our institutions and sensibilities. Only through exploring our diverse roots and branches can we fully comprehend the whole. Only by respecting our differences can we become one society. Only by understanding our diversity can we apprehend our common humanity.

The New York State Task Force Report

In July 1987 I convened a task force on "Minorities: Equity and Excellence." Its members were chiefly minority people with experience in education and related matters—a college president, three university professors, two superintendents of schools, a respected physician, and other educators and child advocates—chaired by Hazel Dukes, President of the New York State Branches of the NAACP. I asked the Task Force to review the curriculum materials prepared by the State Education Department to see if they are free of bias and if they faithfully represent the pluralistic nature of our society. And the Task Force reported "no" on both counts. Change is needed, said the Task Force, change toward a "curriculum of inclusion."

Now when you ask a group of people whose views have not often been consulted in the past to tell you what they think, what you get, understandably, is not only what they think but what they feel. In this case, the Task Force expressed its feelings in strong language; for example, this from the Executive Summary:

African Americans, Asian Americans, Puerto Ricans/Latinos, and Native Americans have all been the victims of an intellectual and educational oppression that has characterized the culture and institutions of the United States and the European American world for centuries. . . . Task Force members and curriculum consultants found that the current New York State Education Department curriculum materials, though im-

Responsibility Is an Active Word

Sue Keister and Hank Resnik

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proved recently, are contributing to the miseducation of all young people through a systematic bias toward European culture and its derivatives.

The report was submitted in July 1989. Unfortunately, its language offended some who, I think, would be inclined to agree with many of its recommendations, taken dispassionately. Much of the mainstream press attacked the report with a vengeance—often presenting it, despite the facts of the case, as official policy. There were expressions of support from other quarters—and there was hate mail, some of it so disgusting it makes a *prima facie* case for a project of this kind.

The Task Force report called attention to a legitimate need in our schools. However, it did not define our agenda for action. For more than six months our staff studied the matter, drawing on their own experience, reviewing the professional literature, consulting with curriculum experts and practitioners, and examining other states' and localities' implementation of curriculums reflecting cultural diversity. Only after this extensive review did I recommend, and the Board of Regents take, any action in the matter.

A Plan of Action

In February 1990, the Regents directed the Commissioner and the staff to develop, and to submit to the Board of

Regents for review, a detailed plan for increasing understanding of American history and culture, of the history and culture of the diverse groups which comprise American society today, and of the history and culture of other peoples throughout the world.

The Regents directed that the plan address such matters as:

- A schedule for syllabus review and revision;
- A process for ensuring that informed people of diverse backgrounds are consulted;
- Attention to the need for textbooks, software, and other instructional material relevant to a new curriculum;
- Appropriate teacher training and teacher participation in curriculum planning;
- A statewide awareness program involving boards of education, parents, and community organizations; and
- Development of accountability measures.

New York State syllabi are not mandated. Their use in the classroom depends on their wide availability and on teachers' and administrators' perception of their worth. In order to ensure that the goals of this project would be met, therefore, the plan was to include training to familiarize teachers and administrators with the content, aims, and uses of the revised syllabi. Above all, the plan must ensure that syllabus review and revision be thoughtful,

scholarly, and apolitical. Such a plan was submitted and approved in April.

The first step was the Regents' appointment in July 1990 of a Syllabus Review and Development Committee to advise the Department on social studies syllabi, with special emphasis on global studies and United States history, kindergarten through 12th grade. The 22 members and 1 consulting member of this Committee are distinguished school teachers, supervisors, and administrators, university-level scholars and teacher educators, selected for their significant contributions in relevant fields. The Committee is ethnically and racially diverse; a range of informed views is represented.

Assisted by Department staff, the Syllabus Review and Development Committee is reviewing the State's social-studies syllabi, assessing their completeness, accuracy, scholarly integrity, and pedagogical effectiveness. The Committee is scheduled to submit this winter its analysis of needed revisions and a detailed plan for accomplishing them. The Commissioner will then recommend next steps to the Board of Regents.

What We Will Keep in Mind

As we begin our review and development process, several considerations inform our efforts:

1. Revising syllabi to make them more reflective of our diversity is not just a matter of adding information. It is a matter of perspective. From the perspective of Europe, Columbus did indeed discover America. But from the point of view of the Native Americans who greeted his arrival, it was Columbus who was lost, not they. Life and history are complex, and good education helps students understand its complexity. We must learn to see phenomena through others' eyes as well as our own.

2. We need both the whole and the parts. One of the central missions of the American public school is to develop a shared set of values and a common tradition to which we can all belong. This mission must continue. But at the same time we need to help each child find his or her place within the whole, and create more tolerance

and understanding of those who are different. As Virginia Sanchez Korrol has said, "We should give every child a sense of participation, a sense [of having] an investment in this country."⁷

3. Our Western tradition must be maintained. The immediate roots of this country's values and institutions lie in the Mediterranean basin and Western Europe. This tradition has been much changed and enriched by the cumulative participation of the sons and daughters of Africa, of Asia, of the Caribbean, of Central America, of Native Americans established here before the Europeans came. We have not always lived up to our ideals, but especially in today's world, we would be shortchanging our children if we failed to ground them in the values of our democratic society—respect for the individual, the rule of law, the tolerance of difference, free election, free speech, free trade unions, freedom of religion.

4. A multicultural curriculum is appropriate for *all* children. *All* children in our society should learn about the society as a whole, in its diversity as well as its unity. Greater knowledge of one another and our differences will not alone guarantee a kinder, more tolerant society, but it may be a prerequisite.

5. We must start when children are very young. Attitudes toward self, family, and others are developed very early. While they are still at home or in preschool, children must be helped to take pride in themselves and to respect those who are different.

6. Curriculum alone is not enough—we must also attend to instructional material, teaching method, teaching education and support, the composition of the school staff, school organization and operation, assessment practices, and all the rest. The "hidden" or implicit curriculum of the school must be consistent with the curriculum plan.

7. Whatever we do must be characterized by a high level of scholarship and historical accuracy. We do not want to rewrite history; we want to teach it better. What we aim to do is to teach more of the facts about more of our people. Fortunately, we are not breaking new ground; a sizable body of work has accumulated during the past 25 years.⁸

I conclude with a word about truth. I have often been told that this effort on which we have embarked is warranted, but only if we adhere scrupulously to the truth of our history. I agree, of course; but at the same time I think the advice is inside-out. It is not that we should embark upon understanding diversity only if we adhere to the truth; it is that we *must* embark upon understanding diversity, because the truth of our history demands it. □

¹E. P. Cubberly, (1909), *Changing Conceptions of Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.), pp.14–16. Cited in M.M. Gordon, (1964), *Assimilation in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press), p.98

²J. A. Banks, (1977), *Multicultural Education: Practices and Promises* (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation), p.12

³*Ibid*, pp.11–13

⁴S. Fordham and J.U. Ogbu, (1986), "Black Students' School Success: Coping With the Burden of 'Acting White,'" *The Urban Review* 18: 176–206.

⁵S. Mydans, (April 25, 1990), "Black Identity vs. Success and Seeming 'White,'" *The New York Times*.

⁶G. Myrdal, (1944), *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row).

⁷Remark made by Virginia Sanchez Korrol on November 22, 1989, in a meeting held for the purpose of advising state Education Department Staff and members of the Board of Regents on the project which this article discusses.

⁸A useful review of works on multicultural education is C.E. Sleeter and C. A. Grant, (November 1987), "An Analysis of Multicultural Education in the United States," *Harvard Educational Review* 57: 421–444.

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