

Trends

English

R. BAIRD SHUMAN

Knowing Who We Are

Teachers throughout the United States—even those in small town and rural America—are keenly aware that the racial mix in their schools and communities is quickly changing as our nation becomes more multicultural and multiracial. The situation is, of course, most noticeable in our large cities. The public schools of Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, New York City, and Philadelphia now draw more than 75 percent of their student bodies from racial minorities (National Center for Educational Statistics 1987).

Among the problems that teachers in such situations encounter among their students are:

- functional illiteracy,
- an overwhelming lack of self-esteem,
- a lack of self-knowledge and of knowledge about the history of their own people.

English teachers have increasingly found ways to deal with all of these problems. Solving the last of them provides the key to solving the others. Many students newly arrived from foreign places like Latin America and southeast Asia struggle to forget their pasts, to bury their heritages. They want to blend in as quickly as they can with the dominant culture. Many greet parental efforts to preserve the old ways of life with indifference, sometimes with open hostility.

English teachers who deal with these students may find that the conventional literary canon has little to offer them. It is too far removed from their cultures and experiences to have immediate meaning. Also, it is usually clearly apparent that minority students need more work in language, in communication skills such as speaking and writing, and in basic reading than they do in literature. Teachers in situations where such is the case have found that

they can productively adapt Eliot Wigginton's "Foxfire" approach in teaching English to their own classrooms and students. By doing so, they can awaken in their students an appreciation for the heritages from which they have sprung.

When Wigginton first went to Rabun Gap, Georgia, to teach English two decades ago, he found a student body in which few students aspired to continue their educations beyond high school and in which the dropout rate was alarmingly high. English as it had been defined in that school—which defined it as probably 90 percent of the schools in the nation did—had little overt relevance to these students. They resisted learning it, shunned conventional literature, gave minimal effort to writing about things that did not matter to them, and generally were deficient readers.

Wigginton, a 1989 MacArthur Award recipient for his pioneering efforts, set his students to work collecting information about the folkways of their own area. He engaged their speaking skills by having them interview people in the community who knew about such things as how to use divining rods to find water or how to make soap from scratch. His students then wrote up what they had discovered so that it could become a part of a newsletter that was printed and distributed broadly. From these humble beginnings came a curriculum, essentially student directed, that has now yielded several books and was the basis for a Broadway show.

The Foxfire approach to teaching English does not preclude reading the classics. It defers reading them until students have developed the skill, motivation, and background to read them meaningfully and joyfully. Meanwhile, it engages the communication skills of all the students at their own levels of

competence. Student effort results in a tangible product. The prospect of having an audience outside the school motivates students to do their best without being told that they have to.

The Foxfire movement also puts young students in touch with their elders in ways that they have never experienced before. As a result of Foxfire, the well-documented alienation of adolescents from older people has been obliterated in Rabun Gap.

Teachers and administrators who encourage this approach to teaching English to minority students must be prepared for some community concern. For many laypeople and anxious parents, English is reduced to a simple equation:

$$E = G + D$$

(English = Grammar + Drill)

People who view English in this way can be made to see, however, that the Foxfire approach succeeds in accomplishing the ends that more conventional English classes do and that, moreover, it accomplishes them better.

Neil Postman considers literature essential to the lives and survival of people and of nations. "Ever since we can remember," he writes, "all of us have been telling ourselves stories about ourselves, composing life-giving autobiographies of which we are the heroes and heroines" (p. 122). Postman views literature, however, in much broader terms than such recent critics of education as Allan Bloom and the other neo-scholastics traditionally have. By so doing, he demonstrates how vital it is in the lives of all people and nations.

National, racial, and ethnic diversity are captured in the stories of the people who produce them. As the United States becomes more ethnically diverse, the literature to which students in elementary and secondary schools are exposed can, will, and does help

them to establish their identities within their own ethnic contexts *and* to understand culture contexts outside their immediate spheres of experience. As schools seek means to help students shape their own identities, it is, therefore, more important to look around and ahead in literature than to look only backward. □

References

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Voices

The Principal

BRUCE CONRAD DAVIS

A Consensus on Christmas

"We should junk our Christmas program and have a Winter Festival instead. The people coming into this school don't celebrate Christmas anyhow." That proposal came from a teacher on my staff, and a few others said, "Amen." The ball was now in my court, and I didn't know quite what to do.

Our school population is described as low socioeconomic. The students represent 19 different languages, and 44 percent are limited-English-speaking. Thirty-eight percent of our families are receiving financial assistance. The enrollment is nearly evenly divided between Latin and Asian students. The major languages are English, Spanish, Vietnamese, and several different Chinese dialects.

Since I believe we work for the parents, my response was that I would ask the parents for their reactions to this proposal at the next School Advisory Committee meeting. The "hallelujah quartet," I knew, wouldn't be thrilled with this idea, but then again what could they do? We are working for the parents and children.

At the SAC meeting, I presented both sides of the issue and asked the parents for their thoughts. A Chinese man, a recent immigrant, stood up and spoke, "We should continue to have

the traditional Christmas program. That is what you do in this country, and we want to be part of what is done in this country. We want to learn your customs."

All right, I thought. This is working out better than I could have hoped for. Just then, a parent from Mexico arose and faced the Chinese gentleman.

"Do you really mean that?"

"Yes, I do."

The audience applauded vigorously. The parents gave unanimous approval for continuing our Christmas program traditions. I reported back to the staff that the Christmas carols would continue.

All principals know that parental support is of critical importance. We keep that support level at high tide by giving parents a chance to sound off. People like to offer their opinions, and we give them a chance to do so.

We also weave in a few twists that increase our level of parent support. Each spring I send a letter, translated into four languages, to all of the parents of the 650 students in our school. I ask them to write back, in their native language if they prefer, and let me know what they like and dislike about my service as principal. They can include remarks about other subjects, but most stick to the topic. The responses

(60-67 percent respond) are translated and sorted according to language. They are three-hole punched and placed in a binder and indexed by language. I give copies to the board of education and the superintendent. I review the letters and report back to the parents, again in the four languages, letting them know that I've acknowledged their concerns and criticisms.

If there's something I can do to remedy their complaints, I tell them about my plans for action. If there is nothing I can do, I tell them why. When I make the corrections they suggest, I let them all know, again, in the four major languages.

This approach strengthens the dialogue between the home and the school. It shows an ethnically disparate population that they have more common denominators than they may have imagined. Perhaps this is why it's normal for us to have 150 to 200 parents attend our 8:30 a.m. parent meetings. We never forget that we work for the parents. We treat them as equals and set high standards for them as well as for our students—and this makes us all want to "measure up." □

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