

Why We Must Pluralize the Curriculum

It is not necessary to choose between uniqueness and commonality in building a core curriculum. In a democratic society, all cultural groups must be represented.

ASA G. HILLIARD III

Within the past two to three years, the number of scholars who assert the exclusive political and cultural correctness of "Western culture" has greatly increased. These voices have viciously attacked the very thought associated with cultural pluralism in American society, especially as it applies to school curriculums. Attempts to pluralize the curriculum such as Stanford University's Western Civilizations program, New York State's Curriculum of Inclusion, and Portland, Oregon's Multicultural Curriculum effort have been met with bitter opposition by conservative scholars throughout the nation, who have taken this position without benefit of a constructive dialogue with a broad base of minority group representatives.

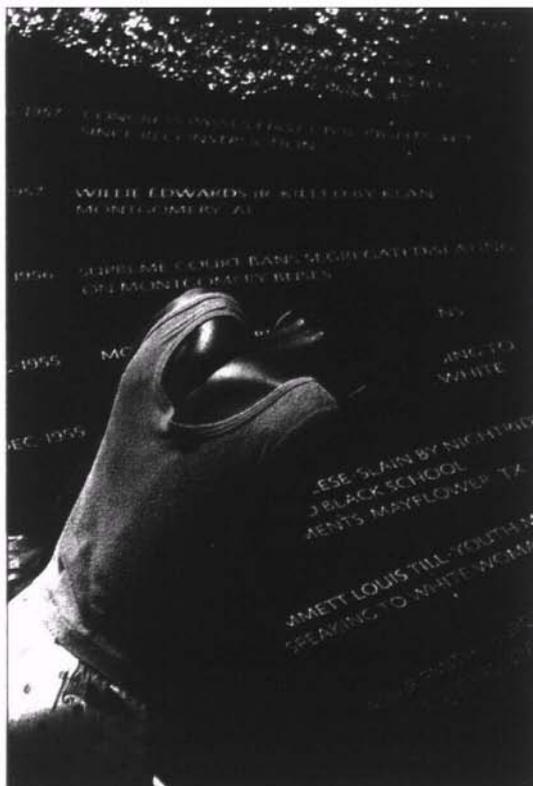
What accounts for this standardized formula response? It is becoming increasingly clear that some private groups have decided, unilaterally, on a course of action for the general public. They are beginning to express xenophobia at the national level. For example, a recent news article in *The Atlanta Constitution* (Auster 1991), cited the fact that the United States is

undergoing major shifts in its ethnic population and that Europeans are rapidly becoming the minority. "Minorities" are becoming the "majority." The great cultural diversity among minority cultural populations, the author feared, will lead to a "disuniting" of the United States.

This fear is reminiscent of a similar type of thinking present in the 1920s. White supremacists Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard, among many others, were fearful of new immigrants from Europe, especially those from Eastern and Southern Europe. They visualized the advent of these new groups in the United States as a "Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy" (Stoddard 1971) and "The Passing of the Great Race" (Grant 1924).

Restoring the True Human Record

But the demands made by diverse ethnic groups for inclusion in the curriculum will not go away. In fact, African Americans' demands for pluralistic curriculum changes were initiated long before the terms *Euro-*



In Montgomery, Alabama, the Civil Rights Memorial details the long struggle toward equal representation.

centric, Afrocentric, and multicultural were introduced (Woodson 1933, Dubois 1969). Attempts to include black history in the curriculum go almost as far back as four centuries, when the first struggles for liberation began. One need only read Carter G. Woodson's classic work *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933) in order to understand this. W. E. B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1969) and his other essays in *The Education of Black People: Ten Critiques* (Aptheker 1973), are also required reading.

Those who have studied worldwide liberation struggles know that the manipulation of information, including propaganda and disinformation, are primary tactics employed in the domination process. Oppressive populations defame, stigmatize, stereotype, and distort the reality of dominated populations. Oppressive populations change the true human record through denial of the very reality of the total human

experience, including their own (Barzun 1965, Benedict 1959, Biddis 1970, Carlson 1972, Gossett 1973, Montague 1968, Stanton 1960, Kamin 1974, Chase 1977, Gould 1981, Serfontein 1978, Schwartz and Disch 1970, Jones 1972).

The mass media, entertainment, and schools are an integral part of the information process and, in oppressive societies, are a part of the domination process as well. Schools in apartheid, segregated, or racist societies are not neutral, nor is their information base.

A Valid Curriculum

Centuries of falsehood and defamation cannot be corrected simply by ceasing to present overt expressions of false and defamatory data. The old record must be purged! The primary goal of a pluralistic curriculum process is to present a truthful and meaningful rendition of the whole human experience. This is not a matter of ethnic quotas in the curriculum for "balance"; it is purely and simply a question of validity. Ultimately, if the curriculum is centered in truth, it will be pluralistic, for the simple fact is that human culture is the product of the struggles of all humanity, not the possession of a single racial or ethnic group.

We must consider curriculum equity in the schools from two angles. On the one hand, the academic level of the content can be pitched much higher and yet be well within reach of the masses of our children, provided that we equitably distribute high-quality instruction. On the other hand, we must awaken to the fact that no academic content is neutral nor is the specific cultural content of any ethnic group universal in and of itself. Under the old white supremacy system, the white European culture was considered both "universal" and "superior" to all other

cultures. Some contemporary scholars in the multicultural curriculum dialogue still hold this view.

We say that the search for truth is our highest goal for students. To foster it, we must facilitate in students the assumption of a critical orientation. Of course, criticism implies an awareness of all cultural alternatives and a thoughtful and honest examination of those alternatives. No cultural tradition can be regarded as immune to criticism.

Preserving Diversity

I agree with E. D. Hirsch (1987) and others who say that there are many interests to be served by the development and presentation of certain common cultural content for all our children. However, I do not believe that it is necessary to choose between uniqueness and commonality. This is a false dichotomy. Human minds and systems are powerful and flexible enough to handle both. Nevertheless, in a democratic society it makes all the difference how we arrive at a common core.

We must not commit cultural genocide by crushing cultural uniqueness. A politically correct curriculum "canon" is more appropriate for sectarian religion than it is for a scientific and democratic school and society. Curriculum catechism and cultural totalitarianism are more associated with propaganda than with truth. It's hard to see how some conservative ideologues can argue for "school choice" and for a curriculum "canon" at the same time, for intellectual freedom and cultural indoctrination at the same time, for multiculturalism on the one hand and for coerced conformity on the other.

Respect for diversity is the hallmark of democracy. This nation was founded by those who fled the cultural totalitarianism of Europe to seek reli-

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gious and political freedom. Do the critics of pluralistic curriculums wish to require "universalism" in religion and politics?

Beyond Self-Esteem

Pluralism in the curriculum is not a matter of "trivial pursuit." Many of the justifications the media give for a multicultural curriculum are minor and irrelevant to the central issue: editorial arguments about "self-esteem" and the role of multicultural curriculum in "producing academic achievement" miss the mark. Valid scholarship must be the source of curriculum content.

Children can handle the truth, warts and all. Scholars can produce it, provided that they create the appropriate multidisciplinary, multiracial, multinational, non-sexist forums for research, development, and dissemination (UNESCO 1978). The United Nations Educational and Cultural Organization provides us with a model approach for the correction of defamation and distortion: In 1981, UNESCO published an eight-volume *General History of Africa*. The organization brought together scholars of all races, nationalities, and many academic disciplines to create a more valid rendering of African history than the defamatory and false records that were extant as late as the early part of this century. Much more of this work must be done.

Our book, *The Infusion of African and African American Content in the School Curriculum* (Hilliard et al. 1990), includes an extensive outline and bibliography in the chapter "African People in World History" by John H. Clarke. One look at this work will reveal the huge gap between what is known and what is taught about people of African descent in the mainstream curriculum. This bibliography provides a model of what must be done for Hispanics, American Indians, Asians, and other under- or misrepresented groups. It also challenges the

antiminority and antipluralism rhetoric that implies that trivial changes in existing curriculum are sufficient. By trivial changes, I refer to the common practice of adding a sprinkling of minority individuals to "color" a manuscript rather than incorporating data on the influence of all human groups on major human events.

The Whole Story

Curriculum change must proceed first and foremost from the assumption that there is truth in the whole of human

experience. Schools must also accept the fact that some racial and ethnic groups have endured hundreds of years of systematic defamation that has distorted, denied, and deformed the truth of their cultural and historical reality.

A wealth of old, multidisciplinary, international, and multiracial literature exists that would allow us to find the true stories of the roles of all groups in human history so that we could include them in the school curriculums. Nothing less than the full truth of the human experience is worthy of our schools and our children. | |

The Endangered Black Male Child

WILLIE J. WRIGHT

The plight of the African American male in America continues to be that of an endangered species. No support group has yet appeared to prevent the extinction of this valuable human resource. The media provide us daily with the facts:

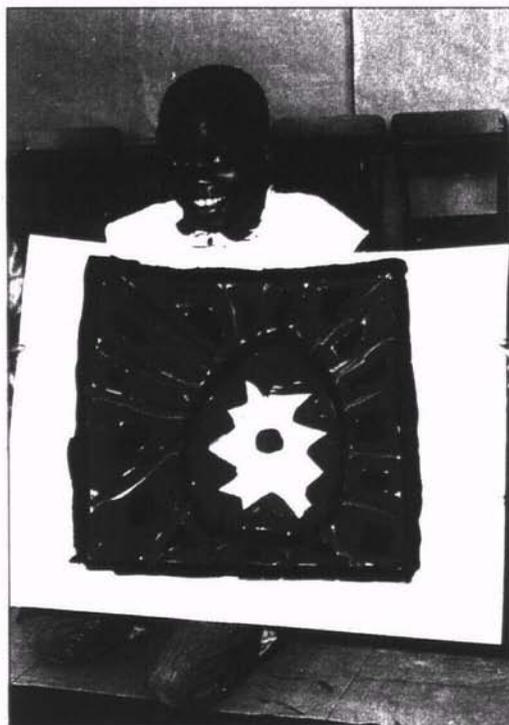
- The leading cause of death among black males between the ages of 15 and 24 is homicide.
- Black men represent 6 percent of the country's population but more than 40 percent of the prison population.
- A black man is more than twice as likely to be unemployed as an Anglo man.
- Some 18 percent of black males drop out of high school (*Ebony*, August 1983).

And the list could go on and on. Yet, although we often read about well-heeled individuals who lead groups of influential citizens on

quests to save the manatee, crocodile, bald eagle, the Everglades, Grand Canyon, alligators, whales, the petrified forest, the Sequoia trees, no visible group seems to be interested in expending any energy to save the African-American male.

One astute psychologist, Spencer Holland, advocated creating all-black male classes in urban schools to be taught by black male teachers. This call fell mostly on deaf ears, until a March day in 1987, when *Washington Post* syndicated columnist William Raspberry discussed Holland's ideas in one of his articles.

When I read Raspberry's column, I was



Patricia Crosby, Mississippi Cultural Center photo

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principal of Pine Villa Elementary School in South Dade County, Florida. Observing Pine Villa's population, I saw clearly that some black kindergarten children could already be easily identified as potential dropouts. Spencer Holland's thoughts sparked an idea within me: I thought to myself, *why not?*

Providing the Missing Male Factor

A large number of black boys are from single parent homes, headed by a matriarch, guardian, older sister, aunt, or grandmother. If they attend Sunday school, they are taught by females. Usually the first five grades (K-4th) are taught by females. And if the principal is female, a female teacher sends them to a female principal for reprimand and/or punishment when they get in trouble. Their inappropriate behavior is reported to a female head of household. All of the legitimate role models and authority figures in the lives of most of these boys for the first eight to nine years of their lives are female.

These young boys need legitimate black male role models in their lives.

And the earlier this can become a reality, the better adjusted the black male child may become. In those cases where African-American males are simply not available, for whatever reason, then an interested, positive, understanding male of another ethnicity might be an acceptable substitute.

We began a program at Pipe Villa that emphasized the cultural and academic development of the black male child at the earliest possible level in public school - kindergarten. The program aimed to develop a positive self-concept within these young boys, as well as the motivation to succeed in spite of their circumstances.

To test our theory that black male children would do better if they were exposed to positive male role models, especially black males, we unscientifically chose 20 kindergarten black males for our project, and gave them an African-American male teacher. We then chose 23 1st grade black males and paired them with a white male teacher. Our only requirements were that the boys chosen had to be currently enrolled at Pine Villa and had to be living in a female-headed

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household with no available male figure in their immediate family.

We recruited successful African-American males as volunteer teacher aides to work under the directions of the male teachers. Among the volunteers were a physician, attorneys, businessmen, corporate managers, a dentist, policeman, ministers, and military officers. They spent from 30 minutes of a lunch hour to 4 hours a day in the classrooms. Some professionals visited infrequently; others kept weekly or monthly time slots.

The program focused on five objectives;

- attendance,
- academic achievement,
- formulation and development of dyads (partnerships between two boys),
- gentlemen's social graces (*esprit de corps*),
- appropriate behavior for school life.

A New *Esprit de Corps*

This program was successful beyond our expectations. Out of the 20 kinder-

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garten subjects enrolled, 18 had perfect attendance, 1 student was absent 2 days, and 1 was absent 1 day, both for illness. Out of the 23 1st graders enrolled, 22 had perfect attendance and 1 student missed 2 days.

Students in the "black male" kindergarten class scored 7-11 percent higher on standardized tests of sounds and letters than students in the regular coeducational class. Their mathematics scores were 8-9 percent higher than those of the coeducational class. The 1st grade class scored 4-5 percent higher in reading comprehension and 5-7 percent higher in mathematics than their coeducational counterparts.

The formation of dyads within each class proved most helpful to the students. The children learned to accept responsibility for their actions and for their academic success and attendance. They were encouraged to become their "brother's keeper"—members of each dyad exchanged telephone numbers and home addresses. Each boy agreed to call or visit his partner at least once per week after

school hours or weekends to assist the other if needed, or just to keep in touch. This not only developed esprit de corps within each class, but got the parents involved with each other for the first time.

We taught the children gentlemen's social graces and rehearsed them daily. We required that these be exhibited outside the classroom—in the corridors, cafeteria, and home—as well as inside the classroom. We taught the boys to say *please* and *thank you*, and to compliment each other's work, clothing, and successful efforts to use appropriate language. They also had to learn the art of disagreeing without hostility or confrontation.

Countering Negative Forces

The positive nature of the class constantly reinforced students' positive self-concepts, and a spirit of "I know I can." Not a single fight occurred in either the kindergarten or the 1st grade class. The boys' dining etiquette was demonstrated daily in the cafeteria.

When we implemented this program, Spencer Holland cited it as "the only such program in the nation." Since then, several school districts have attempted versions of the idea of all-black male classes. Now, the Baltimore and the Milwaukee school districts are implementing the idea. *The Washington Post*, *Baltimore Times*, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, *Miami Herald*, *Education Week*, *New York NewsDay*, and *Time Magazine* all have published articles discussing the idea of all-black, all-male classes.

We must make every effort to preserve the African-American male. To those who would argue against this program, we challenge them to "provide a better horse and we will ride it." We must hurriedly counter the forces that are conspiring to destroy the African-American male child before his threatened extinction becomes a reality. □

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