

# A Culture in Common

*The mission of our public schools should be to instill in children our shared, not our separate, cultures.*

DIANE RAVITCH

The classrooms of America today are more racially and ethnically diverse than ever. Now that the children in American schools are the descendants of so many different nationalities, religions, races, and ethnic groups, teachers and curriculum makers are asking "Whose culture should we teach? Whose history, literature, and art? Whose ideas and perspectives?"

The answers to such questions are not simple. They will determine not only the curriculum, but the purpose of the public school and the nature of American national identity. Thus it is important to reflect on what we mean by teaching "culture." We want to convey to children the knowledge, skills, language, and habits they will need to participate successfully in their own society, but it is also important for them to learn about other cultures, so they will have a broader understanding of the world.

Both of these goals are important, but priority must be given to teaching about the history and culture of the United States. American history and literature should explain who the American people are and where we came from. What were the turning points, the crises, that shaped and changed our nation? Who are our heroes? What are our ideals? Which



"Whose culture should we teach?" is a topic teachers across the nation are debating. Here, Miami teacher Lori Ford discusses the issue.

poems, novels, essays, orations, and songs best typify the American spirit? What ideas, institutions, and values have held this polyglot people together as a nation for more than 200 years?

## Common vs. Separate Identities

Today, there are many people who argue that America has no "we," no national culture at all; our society, they say, is nothing more than a collection of distinctive racial and ethnic cultures. Some of the more vehement partisans in this camp claim that any effort to teach a "common culture" disparages the role and contributions of minority groups. Such critics speak contemptuously of the common culture, as if it

were a vehicle of oppression. They claim that public schools must teach children to revere the culture of their parents, grandparents, and ancestors. The goal of the public school, they say, must be to transmit, preserve, and strengthen the separate identities of the nation's many racial and ethnic cultures. By this definition, the culture taught by the school will vary according to the color or language of the children in the school.

The most strident critics of the common culture demand that the curriculum teach contempt for the founders of the nation and for everything European or white. This extremism is simply an inverted form of racism, which should be rejected outright by teachers and curriculum developers everywhere. Race-bashing and nation-bashing should never be permitted.

Several cities have endorsed the trend toward using ethnicity as the organizing principle of the social studies curriculum. This is a dangerous development that may encourage ethnic separatism and cause intergroup tension. It is not the role of public schools to teach children the customs and folkways of their ethnic or racial group; that is, as it has always been, the role of the family, the church, and the local community. Nor is it the role of the public school to encapsulate children in the confines of their family's inherited culture. It is the role of the public school to open children's minds to new worlds, new ideas, new possibilities.

The historic mission of the American public schools—the common

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schools—has been to help forge a national identity that all Americans share. And the increasing diversity of our population makes it even more imperative that our schools teach children what we as Americans have in common. The schools have failed in this mission whenever they excluded any group from equal opportunity for education. Conversely, they have succeeded whenever they taught children the knowledge and skills that are necessary for citizenship, for work, for continued education, and for full participation in American society.

### Amalgamated America

The common culture is not an Anglo-Saxon melting pot: it is an amalgam of the contributions of all the different groups that have joined American society and enriched our shared culture. The common culture is the work of whites and blacks, of men and women, of Native Americans and African Americans, of Hispanics and Asians, of immigrants from England, France, Germany, Mexico, Haiti, Ireland, Colombia, Scandinavia, Cuba, Italy, Poland, Russia, Thailand, Korea, India, China, the Philippines, and Ghana; of Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Mormons, and millions of other individuals who added their voices to the American chorus.



*Traditionalists and multiculturalists often disagree about curriculum emphasis. Here, Fernando Gonzalez Reigosa discusses a humanities program with a multicultural focus.*

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The sons and daughters of every other nation in the world have made the United States their home. No matter where they came from, they are Americans. With their music, their foods, their sports, their customs, their holidays, their dress, and their dreams, they have made their mark on America. The United States has changed them, and they in turn have changed the United States.

The common culture is a Thai deli in San Francisco that sells bratwurst, pizza, espresso, and tropical ice cream. It is the Puerto Rican bakery that

makes the best bagels on the upper West Side of Manhattan. It is the Colombian woman in New York who tells a reporter after her naturalization ceremony that she intends to celebrate her new American citizenship by going out for sushi.

The common

culture is jazz, the blues, the square-dance, the waltz, salsa, the polka, rock-and-roll, the fox trot, and rap. It is "America the Beautiful," "The Star-Spangled Banner," "America," and "Go Down, Moses." It is Shakespeare, Mozart, Bob Dylan, Spike Lee, and Norman Lear.

The common culture is a blend of high technology and bland commercialism. It is Coca-Cola, IBM, Kleenex, Saran Wrap, McDonald's, Levi's, Sesame Street, and bubble gum. It is Oprah, Johnny, Madonna, and the Simpsons. It is Thomas Alva Edison, George Washington Carver, and Henry Ford. It is Superman, Batman, Robin Hood, Dick Tracy, and WonderWoman.

The common culture is Patrick Henry, declaring, "Give me liberty, or give me death!" It is Ralph Waldo Emerson celebrating individualism, and Henry David Thoreau counseling civil disobedience. It is Abraham Lincoln pledging "that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." It is Martin Luther King, Jr., calling on others to share his dream of a nation where people are judged by their character, not by the color of their skin. It is Elizabeth Cady Stanton rewriting the Declaration of Independence as a feminist document.

The common culture is Samuel Gompers fighting for an eight-hour day, and Ida B. Wells crusading against lynching. It is Cesar Chavez organizing migrant workers, and it is Hubert Humphrey battling for civil rights at the 1948 Democratic convention. It is Frederick Douglass demanding an end to slavery, and it is Susan B. Anthony trying to cast a vote for president in 1872, when women did not have the right to vote.

The common culture is Thomas Jefferson, writing "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." It is George Washington, gladly handing over the reins of power to his duly elected successor, a remarkable event in world history. It is Bayard Rustin, putting his life on the line time and again for oppressed people of every race, creed, and nationality.

The common culture is Franklin D. Roosevelt, reminding Americans in the depths of the Great Depression that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." And it is the eminent jurist Learned Hand, telling his fellow citizens in 1944 that "the spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right."

The common culture is Langston Hughes and Benjamin Franklin, both of whom spoke directly to the common man and woman. The common culture is the folk songs of Woody Guthrie, the pop songs of Irving Berlin, and Julia Ward Howe's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." It is the eloquent voices of James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Chief Seattle, Alice Walker, Harvey Milk, and Abelardo Delgado.

The common culture is the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, which majestically delineate the democratic form of government under which we live and the rights that protect us as equal citizens. The common culture is regular elections, where people choose their leaders. It is the Supreme Court, the Congress, the state legislatures, the local school boards, town meetings, and the debates about their decisions. The common culture may be found at the newsstand, on the radio, and on television, where citizens know that they have a right to express their opinion and to



*Deciding curriculum priorities isn't easy. Miami teacher Charles Belekis discusses how to help students develop positive attitudes about people from different cultures, races, and religions.*

read or hear whatever they choose.

For anyone who lives in a city in the United States today, the common culture offers daily contact with people of every race and many different ethnic origins. Within a mile of where I sit writing, there are communities and city blocks where whites, blacks, Puerto Ricans, Central Americans, Indian-Americans, Korean-Americans, and Arab-Americans live and work in close proximity. The nearest commercial street is a placid yet lively symbol of culinary multiculturalism: it has a Jewish delicatessen, a German butcher, an Irish bar, a Mexican restaurant, a sushi bar, a Thai restaurant, several Arab restaurants, an Italian bakery, and several Korean grocers.

### **The Crossroads of Multiculturalism**

Those ethnocentrists who insist on going to war against the common culture, which they claim is an insidious form of European domination, are like children rejecting one of their

parents. What they do not understand is that the common culture *is* multicultural. Take a look at the United States' contingent at the next Olympics. Our team looks like a microcosm of the world. And it is, because it accurately reflects American society.

We lose no part of our multicultural heritage by appreciating the European ideas that created our democratic institutions and honoring the British men who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Indeed, we are at risk of losing our democratic heritage if we fail to study and understand the ideas that established our government and institutions.

Multiculturalism is at a crossroads: Should the public schools encourage racial and ethnic loyalties, or should they remain the agencies of a transformed and enriched common culture? The danger of the former, I believe, is that the public schools will become hopelessly ensnared in ethnic controversies and will lose their central purpose as agencies of social meliorism. The promise of the latter is that it will

strengthen the bonds of fellowship that make us one nation and one people — the American people.

A multicultural curriculum can succeed, but to do so it must achieve several goals. It must teach the core democratic values that enable us to work together, to reach decisions, and to live peaceably as citizens of the same society, values such as tolerance, respect for dissenting opinions, a sense of responsibility for the common good, and a readiness to participate in civic life. It must also teach the history of the American people and of the institutions that made it possible to forge a nation from people of many different backgrounds. Then it must teach children about the rest of the world beyond our borders. Finally, it should demonstrate that racial and ethnic diversity may be a source of strength — as they are in the United States — or a cause of conflict and civil war — as they are in many troubled nations.

### Teaching the Common Culture

The curriculum in American public schools must reflect both multiculturalism and the common culture, both the pluribus and the unum. The common American culture was built over generations by people of many different races, religions, ethnic groups, and cultural backgrounds. Children in every grade must learn that American history, like American culture, is constantly being made and remade by those who live it.

Those who teach history and social studies must avoid mindless celebration of our own or anyone else's history. It is important in teaching history to acknowledge honestly the violations of human rights that mar the history of every country, including our own. It is of no less importance to teach children the democratic ideas and institutions that provide the mechanisms to correct

injustice. Children must learn that evil is ended not by some invisible benign force, but by human effort, by active and thoughtful participation in the political process, and by a willingness to make sacrifices to defend democracy and human rights.

If we teach children to identify only with members of their own race or ethnic culture, we run the risk of promoting and sanctioning ethnocentrism and prejudice. Throughout the world, people have a tendency to care only about the members of their own group. Unchecked, this tendency turns into hatred based on race, religion, ethnicity, language, appearance, and customs.

We don't have to look far to see the dire consequences of ethnocentrism. The Soviet Union, India, Lebanon, Canada, Yugoslavia, and South Africa are current examples where competing nationalisms are causing social havoc. No nation — certainly not our own — has been innocent of the brutal excesses of ethnocentrism.

Throughout human history, people have demonstrated their readiness to persecute and oppress those who are different from themselves. Under no

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circumstances should the curriculum be patterned to stir ethnocentric pride or to make children feel that their self-worth as human beings is derived from their race or ethnic origin.

### The Future of Public Education

It is the job of the schools to teach history, literature, and art in such a way as to diminish and actively combat prejudice. It is the job of the schools to promote a generous appreciation of the common humanity that transcends skin color, religion, language, and other accidents of birth.

If the public schools abandon their historic mission as the common schools of the nation, if they instead foster racial and ethnic separatism, they will forfeit their claim to public support. If the public schools relinquish their responsibility for teaching children an awareness of their American identity, then they will lose their privileged status as public schools. Such a trend would inevitably encourage a flight from public education by those who are repelled by relentless ethnic struggles for control of the curriculum.

If they remain true to their historic role, the public schools will fulfill their obligation to serve as a bulwark against ethnic chauvinism and counter the forces of social fragmentation. And they will exercise their responsibility to teach democratic values and the civic ethics that promote respect for other human beings, without regard to their race or social origins. What is at stake, then, in the current debate about multiculturalism, is nothing less than the future of public education. □

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