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Multicultural Curriculum: A Transformation Channel to Equitable Thinking

by James Boyer

The structural inequities which still exist in America are the result of thought patterns by those who make academic, political, economic and social decisions that dictate and monitor behavior. All behavior emanates from a mentality which implies human value and human worth at some level. All educational programs must have three components: personnel, budget, and curriculum. Every curriculum program makes a silent statement which assigns value and human worth to the clients of that program. Priorities are established, learning sequences are ordered, and program resources are allocated—and all of these functions make statements regarding the structure of our society, the signs, symbols and ceremonies which are deemed significant, and the value placed on human profiles. Structural inequities are policies, practices, program sequences, systems and patterns of reward and punishment, and a host of other aspects of organizational operations perceived as inequitable by those who study public institutions, institutional practices and their impact on culturally diverse populations. Structural inequities exist, in our judgment, because equitable thinking patterns are underemphasized in modern curriculum practice.

Multicultural curriculum provides both individual studies on culturally distinct populations and re-

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structured (often fused) sequences in traditional disciplines so that content and practice are seen from a broader perspective than monocultural applications. Without apology, my position is that monocultural curriculum results in racist, sexist, elitist thinking by all student/clients of such programs and by those whose professional services direct and implement those curriculum learnings. While a major part of curriculum involves content (data, facts, inferences, emphases), there are also materials, artifacts, policies, practices and processes which are as much a part of the learnings as are elements of content.

Toward An Equitable Education

Only when curriculum programs are based on assumptions of equity will American schooling begin to seriously reflect multiculturalism. Ethnic and racial identity are clearly connected to the learner's grasp of curriculum content and skills. The way in which a learner is viewed in the learning setting impacts the learner's belief in his or her ability to achieve. Vincent P. Franklin in **Review of Research in Education** offers the following:

"Historians have generally found significant differences in the patterns of schooling for white immigrant-ethnic minorities and racial-ethnic minorities—Afro-Americans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans."

"The exploitation and oppression were even more severe for the groups that differed physically, as well as culturally, from white Americans . . ."

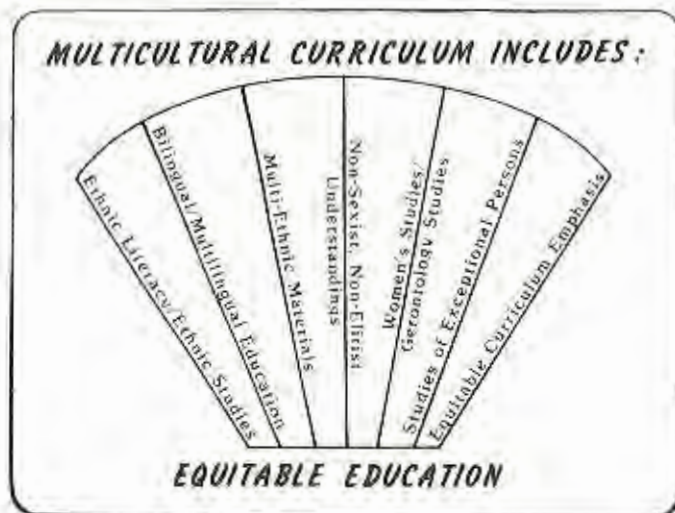
All major documents of the United States (the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, etc.) all purport equity for all persons who are part of our society. The presence or existence of structural inequities suggest that a transformation of thought in quest of equitable decision-making is needed.

When one looks at the curriculum programs of various contours of schooling, the pattern of thinking adopted by learners is shaped by (1) what is included in the formal curriculum (2) what is excluded (3) what is emphasized (4) to what extent is the human diversity encompassed in the program of learning—and perceived as positive elements to be appreciated (5) what photographic, visual or other declarations are made significant elements of curriculum learning.

Multicultural Curriculum: The Vehicle

Multicultural curriculum emerged as an upgrading of traditional curricula which historically reflected a monocultural perspective on learning content—and ultimately monocultural decision-making—for the major institutions of our society. Equitable thinking will result only from equitable curriculum immersion by those who are shaped by the power of curriculum forces. To be sure, there are many dimensions of

multicultural curriculum, however, it functions to enhance America's movement toward a society deemed more equitable because it will reflect reduced racism, sexism, elitism, handicapism, and ageism. The following diagram suggests some significant aspects of multicultural curriculum:



The Power of Curriculum Impact

All curriculum programs are a reflection on society's needs. The curriculum essentially serves to separate literate societies from nonliterate societies. The curriculum becomes the foundation for the mentality held by generations of people—and such mentality dictates behaviors which are modeled by young, impressionable learners. Multicultural curriculum attempts to serve as that channel which will reduce victimization by calling attention to institutional design, policy and practice. Because of its continual quest for equity in all its strands, it is concerned with the way in which persons (or groups of persons) are seen, viewed, treated and respected. Janice Hale in **Black Children: Their Roots, Culture, and Learning Styles** offers the following:

A behavioral style is a framework from which a person views the world.

Since styles are the framework from which one views the world, the style can be observed in all areas of his expression, such as through his world view, language, music, religion, art, work, dance, problem solving, sports, writing, or any other area of human expression.

Behavioral style is directly related to behavioral consequences and multicultural curriculum is a primary vehicle for improved behavioral consequences because it offers types of equitable thinking from which all else emerges.

The Transformation

A transformed view of persons and groups representing differences from the dominant group is es-

sential to equitable thinking. Academic institutions, agencies, and persons are now being called on to view ethnic/racial/economic diversity as a strength rather than as a problem or weakness. Isaura Santiago-Santiago describes the following regarding Puerto Rican learners:

A view of the Puerto Rican as a "problem" is the product of a deficit conceptual framework. Traditionally, school systems have absolved themselves of the responsibility for learning and achievement of minority children. Given the fact that children looked, acted, and spoke differently, wholesale failure was the product of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Lack of achievement was widely attributed by teachers and staff to unspecified variables related to the student and his home (the deficit), rather than to any action or inaction by the schools.

The action by the schools (at whatever level) is now appropriately felt to be the school's major element: its curriculum upgraded to multicultural status. The curriculum will be viewed and treated as a vehicle for raising the standards of a country, a society, a people.

It was only when the major reports of school programs were published (**A Nation at Risk** and many others) that America began to publicly admit that its schools were the foundation of the quality of life for all. Now that politicians, business persons, lay citizens, professionals from all areas are discussing America's schools, it seems only appropriate to utilize this opportunity for further developing curriculum programs toward multicultural status.

Burgess, in describing Native American learning styles, indicates the need for curriculum designs which embrace cultural specificity;

... Recognition and respect for the tribal culture by the school can bestow dignity upon the culture and heavily impact the development of positive self-images by the children who must relate to both the tribal culture and the school.

Multicultural Curriculum: Channel for all Learners

While this discussion has focused on the benefits of multiculturalism for populations historically excluded from the mainstream of decision-making in America, it is pointed out that all learners (specifically referring to white ethnics as well as highly visible ethnic minorities) may be transformed in their thinking through exposure to a curriculum which embraces cultural mobility and ethnic identity. Such exposure enhances the psychological well-being of all learners as well as the cognitive growth so carefully monitored in academic institutions.

Further, throughout this discussion, the references have focused on ethnic-racial-economic differences as reflected in human profiles. While multicultural curriculum encompasses the linguistically

different, the exceptional and handicapped individuals, and works to eliminate sexism, there are those who feel that those categories must be addressed separately. Some curriculum researchers have elected to address those issues independently from the broad issues discussed here. Some of these discussions are in other papers included in this issue.

Multicultural curriculum, at least for the present, seems to be the basic foundation for improved, equitable thought processes in America which will result in decreased victimization of children and adults who experience schooling—both formal and informal.

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