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**What is basic to one group is not necessarily basic to another.**

# Multi-cultural education and the 'basics'

By Fred Rodriquez

The "back to the basics" movement continues to be the education media event of our time. But what is meant by "back to the basics"? Might multi-cultural education be one of those "basics" needed in our system of education?

The "back to the basics" slogan suggests several messages: (1) There is a well-defined movement with clear objectives in existence for well-understood reasons; (2) There is a well-defined set of objectives relative to each discipline which may be called the basics of that discipline; and (3) At some point in our educational past, we were teaching these basics in a manner that deserves to be revived now.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, on all three accounts, the contrary is true. Far from the movement having well-defined reasons for existence, it appears many advocates of the movement are on its "bandwagon" for reasons other than in the interest of education.

The March 1977 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan* is devoted entirely to the examination of this movement. In one article, Ben Brodinsky asserts that his search for the causes of the movement found such factors as: "nostalgia in the '70s, the public's whetted appetite for accountability, the nation's periodic swing to conservatism; the high divorce rate and the disintegration of the family, leading to demands that the schools provide the discipline which the home no longer can; the excess of permissiveness; and a

bundle of the causes in which Dr. Spock, TV, and creeping socialism are all crammed into one bag."<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the causes, I have difficulty in pinpointing just what the movement is advocating. Objectives seem to range from strict drill in the three R's, to a more vague return of religious and patriotic values to the curriculum and the elimination of such "frills" as for example, multi-cultural education. So, while one may or may not agree in spirit with the movement, absolute caution must be taken not to assume the "basics" of instruction and learning are agreed upon, as well as, understood by all. What is basic to one group of people is not necessarily basic to another.

Education in the United States historically has been Anglo-centric and dominated by the pervasive assimilationist forces in American society. A major goal of the common school was to help immigrants and ethnic group youths acquire the cultural characteristics and values of Anglo-Americans. The goals of the common school reflected those of the larger society.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of recent legislation, which primarily is concerned with racial quotas, what has happened in the past continues to happen today. That is, minority and majority students are immersed in an educational setting that is dominated by the Anglo-centric point of view. The experience continues to be one of viewing minorities as stereotypes, or entirely omitting minorities from the curriculum. For the majority student, an opportunity to acquire a better understanding and appreciation of others, as well as of themselves, is lost once again.

Granted, today we hear of a few schools in this country that are "active" and to some extent, successfully addressing some of these important educational concerns. However, one only needs to look a bit closer at the majority of those schools to determine the causes of such "active commitment": (1) The "threat" of a lawsuit lingers over their heads. (2) There is the recent "threat" of possibly losing their federal dollars if they are not providing equal educational opportunities to all students. (3) They have lost a battle in the courtroom and have been ordered to be "active." (4) They now are receiving some form of federal financial assistance to incorporate some "new" programs designed to benefit minority students. The list of reasons for such "committed" efforts can go on, but the point is this: educators and schools across the country are involved "actively" in these educational concerns because of their reaction to some form of pressure from the community, legislation, or from the courts.

A case in point is the recent implementation of Title IX, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in all educational institutions receiving federal financial assistance. The initial reaction to Title IX was very similar to, if not the same as that to minority education programs, with many, **REACTING** to this legislation as something that "we have to do," rather than examining our past educational practices and admitting to the inequality of treatment we have provided for our students and **ACTING** upon Title IX as "the right thing to do." The same is true for multi-cultural education. We only need to hold back our pride and admit that we adopted an educational philosophy and approach that has been slanted to the male, anglo-centric point of view. Then, we can begin to rectify this unfortunate situation, based on our own belief, that this is the right thing to do for all students concerned. It is sad to think that in order to provide some degree of equality among our students in this country, we must be prodded by some form of legislation.



However, those schools which are so active—primarily represent the larger urban areas of this country. Consequently, there are countless schools that have not been affected by the pressure, legislation or court orders primarily because of the complacency of leaving things as they have been and the fact that “we don’t have any minorities here” philosophy. The result, for the vast majority of schools in this country, regardless of their ethnic composition, is the continuance of the Anglo-centric, male-dominated approach. The endless cycle of frustration and resultant rejection by the educational system are experienced by the minority student.

But equally tragic, is the fact that the majority student is denied the opportunity of intellectual freedom and growth within the American system of education. We continue to graduate students from all levels who are “ignorant” of people who are different from themselves—ignorant, only because of a lack of knowledge and understanding. What can be more “basic” than to have the functional knowledge and understanding of all the people with whom we will live, love and share the rest of our lives?

#### What Must We All Do?

**CHANGE.** A simplistic word for such a complex problem. This word has a tendency to frighten most of us. As educators, we have a great capacity to adopt and nestle with, what I call, our “self-patented” educational approach and philosophy. That is, once we get used to doing “our thing” in education a certain way, we adopt it and stick with it, until death do us part. Granted, we constantly are being bombarded by new and innovative ideas, but the majority of the time, we tend to observe these movements as “fads” that we hope eventually will go away. So, why should I bother to change my “self-patented” system? I’m not suggesting that what we were taught in the past and what we do now is all wrong, but if change comes so hard, how in the name of education will we ever move forward and continue to improve our skills? How tragic it is to see an educator who has been doing the same thing for the last five, 10, 15 or 20 years. It is very tragic, but painfully more common than we would like to admit. To change for the sake of change is wrong. To resist change because of some personal “hang-ups” is not only wrong, but detrimental to professional growth, and more importantly denies all students the opportunity to acquire the knowledge that is so critical for their own futures, as well as their present existence. Change is a “basic” educational must. We continually must update and seek alternatives that will best provide all students those necessary skills, experience and knowledge in our ever changing society.

#### Barriers to Change

The educational system does not support its members for being different. Thus, feelings of personal inadequacy on the part of the school administration and teachers result in low levels of personal autonomy and a high level of hostility focused on out-groups which pose real or perceived problems.\* Change boils down to choices by majority members between following a personal value system and following the majority value system. Facilitating change begins with the idea of personal responsibility for individual behavior.

Multi-cultural education is one of those needed changes that will provide all our students a more realistic life experience. But somehow, the term multi-cultural

education stirs in the minds of some people the thought that this is an un-American and unnecessary “frill.” There always has been a deliberate and conscious effort to find and treat differences as a basis of inequality. Once it was called “survival of the fittest,” Today it’s the “haves” against the “have nots.” In a period when the technicians are able to bring time, space, distance and peoples physically closer together, attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviors nevertheless are keeping people far apart. Until all of us, from every strata in this society can come to act and believe that to be different is still to be equal, we cannot achieve the ultimate goal of a truly democratic and pluralistic society. Students must live the ideal that being different doesn’t matter.<sup>5</sup>

#### How? . . . And The Reasons Why

If I were an American teacher or teacher-to-be today, the best thing I could do to guarantee my own professional security and mobility would be to make myself multi-cultural. The best thing that I could do to give my students self-security would be to make them able to function effectively in our multi-cultural society. For example, if I were teaching minority students, I would do this in such a way as not to harm their minority group membership, but rather strengthen it, deepen it, and enrich it by adding to it as much of the Anglo-American experience as I possibly could. If I were teaching Anglo-American children, I would add to their good fortune the additional sensitivity and perspective that come from knowing American minority cultures.

Multi-cultural education is not a favor for the ethnic minority student; it is an obligation and opportunity for all of us to learn, live and share with each other our unique identities and values. What can be more “basic” in the educational process?

Education is more than reading, writing and arithmetic. Education is preparation for life. Students need more than facts and problem-solving skills; they need to know how to lead full and useful lives in a complex world. In a nation made up of a variety of races and nationalities, that means learning how to live and work with people of different skin colors and cultural backgrounds.

A major goal for American public school education should be to provide multiple experiences for all children. It should be as desirable for children of the rich as for children of the poor to know all kinds of people who live in this society. Thus, the opportunity to learn and work with peers from various cultural backgrounds must be provided from hour to hour and from day to day. If this is what is meant by going “back to the basics,” I’ll jump on your bandwagon!

#### NOTES

1. Brodinsky, Ben, “Back to the Basics: The Movement and the Meaning.” *Phi Delta Kappan*, March, 1977, p. 522.
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