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CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: A GOOD MATCH

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This article reflects on the place of multicultural education in Catholic schools. The authors review the history and development of Catholic schools in order to set a context for examination of the appropriateness of multicultural education.

American Catholic schools, like the United States, are constantly evolving. Long a major force on the American educational scene, the steady expansion of Catholic schools was altered dramatically by the wave of reforms ushered in by Vatican II.

Vatican II, which affected almost every aspect of the life of the Roman Catholic Church and its apostolates (Hastings, 1991), portended the revolution that shook the foundations of American Catholic schools. Two elements which contributed to this fundamental change were a significant decrease in the number of religious teaching in Catholic schools and a marked increase in the number of minority students enrolled in Catholic schools.

> For example, the dramatic change in the composition of predominantly religious to overwhelmingly lay faculties in Catholic schools directly affected education. In 1960, only 24.8% of teachers in Catholic schools were lay. This percentage increased to 81.2% by the 1986-87 school year, and 91.6% during the 1996-97 school year. (Milks, 1997)

In addition, the significant increase in the number of minority students, especially in large urban dioceses such as Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, Los

Angeles, and Brooklyn, subsequently contributed to the need for a multicultural approach to Catholic education. In 1970-71, minority enrollment in Catholic schools stood at 10.8%. At that time, the National Catholic Educational Association categorized students as Black Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, American Indians, and All Others. However, in identifying White Americans as "All Others" (Mahar, 1984), the data did not reflect how many students were of, for example, Italian, Irish, or Polish-American heritage and attended schools attached to their ethnic parishes. During the 1996-97 year, the percentage of minority students, now categorized as Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, and Other, had more than doubled to 24.4% (Milks, 1997). Moreover, the large increase in the percentage of non-Catholic students in the schools makes the need for a broader perspective all the more important. During the 1969-70 academic year, only 2.7% of children in Catholic schools were non-Catholic (Mahar, 1984); and by 1996-97, this figure rose to 13.5% (Milks, 1997).

SETTING THE STAGE

Faced with the growing virulence of anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States, in 1884 the bishops who gathered at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore forever changed the shape of American education. The bishops decreed that:

> Near every church a parish school, where one does not yet exist, is to be built and maintained in perpetuum within two years of the promulgation of this council, unless the bishop should decide that because of serious difficulties a delay may be granted. (McCluskey, 1964, p. 94)

The Council further mandated:

> ...that all Catholic parents are bound to send their children to the parish school, unless it is evident that a sufficient training in religion is given either in their homes, or in other Catholic schools; or when because of sufficient reason, approved by the bishop with all due precaution and safeguards, it is licit to send them to other schools. What constitutes a Catholic school is left to the decision of the bishop. (McCluskey, 1964, p. 94)

The rapidly increasing Catholic immigrant population, and a seemingly endless supply of priests, brothers, and sisters to staff these schools for a largely immigrant Church, led Catholic education into a time of considerable growth. The 200 Catholic schools of 1860 grew to more than 1,300 in the next decade, and by the turn of the century about 5,000 Catholic schools were operating in the United States (Mahar, 1987).

Catholic education peaked in 1965 when 14,296 schools served 3,505,186 students (Greeley, McCready, & McCourt, 1976). Shortly thereafter, Catholic schools entered a period of precipitous decline in enrollments. During this period, Catholic schools captured an increasingly smaller market share of Catholic students. The factors that contributed to this decline included a sharply diminished birthrate, migration of Catholic families to areas where Catholic schools were unavailable, increasing costs of Catholic schooling, greater acceptance of public schools by Catholic parents, and changing social attitudes (Convey, 1992). Fortunately, the decline appears to have bottomed out. By the 1996-97 school year, the 8,231 Catholic schools served some 2,645,462 students (Milks, 1997). Moreover, 31 new schools opened during this same time period (Milks, 1997).

While Catholic schools have always served diverse, multicultural immigrant populations in the past—including, for example, Americans of Italian, Irish, and Polish ancestry—today they face the challenge of educating large numbers of various other ethnic groups.

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Catholic schools have done an exceptional job of educating children of all races and nationalities (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Convey, 1992). Yet, demographics clearly indicate that American society is evolving from one that has been centered largely on Western European values to one that shares pluralistic multicultural perspectives. Consequently, in schools affiliated with a church whose very name means universal, it may be time to reconceptualize some of the basic underpinnings of the curricula in Catholic schools by considering a more explicit commitment to a multicultural point of view. At the same time, it is essential to keep in mind that a multicultural perspective is a vehicle, a means to an end, by which Catholic schools may continue to better meet the needs of the students they serve. Recognizing that multiculturalism, from a Catholic perspective,

> ...goes beyond the mere ability to identify and include different types of people in a single group; it calls for an effort to understand sympathetically diverse peoples and cultures; [it] calls for an awareness that cultures different from one's own have their own special qualities and that the people of these cultures need to be met and understood as they are, not stereotyped from a distance. (Heft, 1997, p. 14)

Turning to an instructional context, Banks describes multicultural education as

...an idea, an educational reform movement, and a process whose major goal is to change the structure of educational institutions so that male and female students, exceptional students, and students who are members of diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups will have an equal chance to achieve academically in school. (1993, p. 1)

From this perspective, the thrust of multicultural education is consistent with the time-honored mission of the Church wherein there is no "distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female" (Gal 3:28). Multicultural education can thus provide a tremendous opportunity to implement essential curricular reforms while providing students and educators with the opportunity to foster a deeper understanding of other cultures and religions in supportive, nurturing environments. Multicultural education should be viewed as a process that helps students to acquire the knowledge and skills for and embrace the commitments essential to making our nation and world more responsive to the diversity of the human condition.

As important a contribution as multiculturalism can make, it is important not to accept the movement uncritically. Catholic educators need to be wary of some aspects of multiculturalism, an "ism" espoused by such extremists as Leonard Jeffries (Schlesinger, 1992; Schmidt, 1997) that is apart from the mainline multicultural point of view in the face of legitimate criticisms raised over some of its more radical elements. Rhetoric aside over the more egregious claims of multiculturalists who rail against the evils of "dead White Christian (European) males" and the West as a whole, scholars such as Schlesinger (1992) and others (Bork, 1996; Graff, 1992; Schmidt, 1997) raise serious concerns about multiculturalism. Schlesinger, in particular, cautions that the United States risks taking the *unum* out of *E pluribus unum* and becoming another Bosnia, where long-simmering ethnic hatreds have led to atrocities such as "ethnic cleansing." With this in mind, it is important to focus on the unifying, rather than the potentially divisive, aspects of multicultural education.

In an immigrant nation, two major theories, cultural assimilation and cultural pluralism, have been used to describe the evolving pluralistic nature of American society (Gollnick & Chinn, 1990). Adopting a multicultural perspective can strike a balance between the strengths and weaknesses of these two major theories.

Cultural assimilation is the process by which a subordinate or new group adopts the dominant culture. Perhaps the most popular metaphor describing cultural assimilation is that of the melting pot introduced in Zangwill's 1908 drama, *The Melting Pot* (Gollnick & Chinn, 1990, p. 19). This concept advocates that all people in the United States, regardless of race, creed, or nationality, blend into a new identity known as "American."

The second theory, cultural pluralism, suggests that groups, especially

ethnic groups, that are not permitted to or choose not to assimilate into American culture maintain separate and distinct identities. A commonly used metaphor describes the United States as a salad bowl, wherein individual elements join together to form an entity while retaining their identities.

In order for multicultural education to continue to flourish, it is important to strike a balance when considering the nuances and subtleties which differentiate the theories of cultural assimilation and cultural pluralism. By walking the line between the metaphors of the melting pot and salad bowl, Catholic schools can assist children and their families to retain and value elements of their unique cultures while blending themselves into the fabric of American society.

Catholic educators who adopt a multicultural perspective must focus on those elements that bind people together by, for example, following Jesus' own words "to love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:2).

PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Just as proponents of multicultural education speak of the need for better understanding of other cultures, it is equally important to recognize that children from diverse backgrounds learn in different ways. As educators in Catholic schools ponder whether to continue or to adopt curricula that focus on multicultural perspectives, there are two important considerations that must be kept in mind when working with students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. These are the role of culture in the schools and how to serve the needs of the whole child.

THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN SCHOOLS

Leaders in Catholic schools must understand the significance of culture in the lives of children. "School is the traditional place for acculturating children into our national life. Family, church, and other institutions play an important role, but school is the only institution that is susceptible to public policy control" (Hirsch, 1987, p. 110). In light of Hirsch's insight, Catholic schools must consider the system of culture into which they are incorporating children. Put another way, the behavioral expectations of schools are often a hallmark for how successfully children are acculturated. However, there are two pitfalls that Catholic school leaders should avoid in dealing with behavioral and conceptual expectations.

The first potential problem concerns behavioral controls. Opinions differ concerning the behavior that children should exhibit in school, and Catholic school educators need to be sensitive to these differences while developing appropriate instructional strategies. For example, while a child from one cultural group may be overly quiet in class, a student from a different back-

ground may be overly talkative. In such a situation, a teacher should recognize that these children merit individualized attention and act accordingly.

The second concern focuses on organizational skills based on understanding of conceptual categories. Some cultural groups typically take linear approaches to learning that emphasize the beginning, middle, and end of a task. Students from groups which focus on the global nature of tasks, may adopt a route to completion that appears to be chaotic and disorganized (Brown, 1995). Teachers who value the linear approach, for example, must avoid the temptation to judge harshly a different organizational structure, as this may impede children who operate differently from achieving success. Catholic school teachers who have pre-established views of organizational structures should reexamine their instructional strategies.

SERVING THE WHOLE CHILD

Leaders in Catholic education must be prepared to extend the missions of their schools to serve the whole child. "Catholic schools have a...unique purpose congruent with their role as an extension of the Church's educational function: to help students synthesize faith and culture and faith and life" (Schuttloffel, 1998, p. 295). This mission suggests the need to examine how effectively children from diverse cultural backgrounds are being served.

Serving the whole child in a diverse student population calls for a commitment to recognize that development is a process through which all aspects of a pupil's life—the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social—influence each other. Such an approach presumes that all learning experiences should have equal importance and be accompanied by opportunities for growth rather than be viewed as separate skill or content entities (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Gestwicki, 1995).

In a study of the written curricula of 19 dioceses, Schuttloffel (1998) found that even though "Catholic schools take a holistic approach to education...the needs of the student beyond academic achievement require service and support, and recognition of this need is clear among the dioceses participating in this study" (p. 302). Providing support and opportunities for social development is critical for children, especially those from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The schools in Schuttloffel's study identified the need to promote students' spiritual, moral, physical, creative, and intellectual development. However, these schools apparently did not address the social development of their students. Thus, there is a need for educators in schools that serve diverse student populations to understand more fully the cultural contexts within which social development occurs. To this end, we must raise difficult questions. For example, is it right to expect students from diverse backgrounds to come to school and immediately conform? Can educators understand the

social development needs of their students without experiencing their cultures? And, would social success be more attainable for students who were confident that their teachers understood their lives? The answers to these questions will influence the ongoing success of Catholic schools as they demonstrate the system's willingness to continue to adapt to meet the needs of new student populations.

A related concern deals with the increase in the number of mothers who work outside the home, the high divorce rate, single parent families, and poverty. These factors dramatically affect the families of school-aged children. While many continue to argue that these factors are not concerns of the schools, one can only wonder what will happen to these children if the schools become more involved in developing programs which better meet their needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Catholic educators who wish to create or continue developing multicultural schools would do well to consider the following suggestions:

- Educational leaders should adopt proactive measures to expand their multicultural populations by taking steps such as recruiting qualified minority candidates for positions and offering scholarships to minority children whose families cannot afford tuition. Catholic schools must be committed to preparing students for the rapidly diversifying world in which they will live as adults.
- School leaders have a duty to provide ongoing professional development. Superficial "one-shot flash-and-dash workshops" (Sleeter, 1992, p. 222) which fail to penetrate issues in diversity are of little value. Administrators, along with faculty and staff, should generate long-term professional development goals and strategies, so that change is sustained.
- In a closely related vein, school leaders should assist faculty in the development, selection, and use of culturally inclusive instructional materials and methodologies. These materials should include a variety of perspectives, especially those of women and minorities, previously under-represented in the curriculum. At the same time, educators should include points of view that have been long held. Instructional strategies that are open to all perspectives, new and old, can foster a sense of appreciation for and understanding of diversity in the school community and can hasten the acceptance of new ideas (Banks, 1992).
- Administrators should provide students and teachers with ample opportunities to engage in ongoing culturally enriching activities which enable them to gain greater insight and understanding of the pluralistic, multicultural society within which they live. To this end, administrators must be ready to create and maintain culturally inclusive school environments by actively promoting and developing new programs to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

These reflections are offered in the hope that those Catholic school educators who have not already done so will consider adopting curricula that are multicultural. Taking such initiatives is consistent with the heart of the Church's mission and helps to improve an already outstanding school system.

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