

A Considered Opinion: Diversity, Tragedy, and the Schools

Diane Ravitch

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A Considered Opinion: Diversity, Tragedy, and the Schools, by Diane Ravitch. Reprinted by permission of author.

FOCUS QUESTION

What is the appropriate balance between teaching an American culture, on the one hand, and teaching about the contributions of various ethnic and racial minorities, on the other hand? Is it an either-or situation?

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KEY TERMS

- Assimilation
- Melting pot
- Multicultural education

As U.S. immigration has surged over the past quarter-century, educators have been developing a new response to demographic diversity in the classroom. The public schools have turned away from their traditional emphasis on assimilating newcomers into the national "melting pot." Instead, they have put a new emphasis on multicultural education, deemphasizing the common American culture and teaching children to take pride in their racial, ethnic, and national origins. In the wake of the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington last September 11, however, the tide may be turning away from multiculturalism. Americans' remarkable display of national unity in the aftermath of the attacks could change the climate in the nation's schools as much as it has the political climate in Washington.

Immigration is central to the American experience. Though it is on the rise today, immigration is proportionately smaller now than it was in the first three decades of the 20th century. The census of 2000 found that about 10 percent of the population was foreign-born. In the censuses of 1900, 1910, and 1920, that share was some 14 percent. (Then as now, the nation's black population was about 12 percent.) In those early years of the last century, American society was not certain of its ability to absorb millions of newcomers. The public schools took on the job of educating and preparing them for social, civic, and economic participation in the life of the nation.

What did the public schools in those early years do about their new clientele? First, they taught them to speak, read, and write English—a vital necessity for a successful transition into American society. Because many children served as translators for their parents, these skills were valuable to the entire family in negotiating with employers, shops, and government agencies. The schools also taught habits of good hygiene (a matter of public health), as well as appropriate self-discipline and behavior. More than the three "Rs," schools taught children how to speak correctly, how to behave

in a group, how to meet deadlines, and how to dress for different situations (skills needed as much by native-born rural youth as by immigrant children). Certainly, the schools taught foreign-born children about American history (especially about national holidays, the Constitution, the Revolutionary War, and the Civil War), with a strong emphasis on the positive aspects of the American drama.

They also taught children about the "American way of life," the habits, ideals, values, and attitudes (such as the American spirit of individualism) that made their new country special. If one could sum up this education policy, it was one that celebrated America and invited newcomers to become full members of American society.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, assimilation came to be viewed as an illegitimate, coercive imposition of American ways on unwitting children, both foreign-born and nonwhite. With the rise of the black separatist movement in 1966, black nationalists such as Stokely Carmichael began inveighing against racial integration and advocating community control of public schools in black neighborhoods. In response, many black educators demanded African-American history, African-American heroes, African-American literature, and African-American celebrations in the public schools. In the 1970s, the white ethnic revival followed the black model, and soon government was funding celebrations of ethnic heritage in the schools. By the mid-1970s, just as immigration was beginning to increase rapidly, the public schools no longer focused on acculturating the children of newcomers to American society. Instead, they encouraged children to appreciate and retain their ethnic and racial origins.

The expectation that the public schools will teach children about their racial and ethnic heritage has created enormous practical problems. First, it has promoted the belief that what is taught in school will vary in response to the particular ethnic makeup of the school. Thus, a predominantly African-American school will learn one set of lessons, while a predominantly Hispanic school will learn yet another, and an ethnically mixed school will learn—what? Second,

schools have begun to lose a sense of a distinctive American culture, a culture forged by people from many different backgrounds that is nonetheless a coherent national culture. No state in the nation requires students to read any particular book, poem, or play. Today schools are uncertain about how to teach American history, what to teach as "American" literature, and how to teach world history without omitting any corner of the world (many children learn no world history). Third, the teaching of racial and ethnic pride is itself problematic, as it appears to be a continuation in a new guise of one of the worst aspects of American history.

From our public schools' experiences over the past century, we have learned much about the relative advantages and disadvantages of assimilationism and multiculturalism in the public schools.

Assimilation surely has its strengths. A democratic society must seek to give every young person, whether native-born or newcomer, the knowledge and skills to succeed as an adult. In a political system that relies on the participation of informed citizens, everyone should, at a minimum, learn to speak, read, and write a common language. Those who would sustain our democratic life must understand its history. To maximize their ability to succeed in the future, young people must also learn mathematics and science. Tailoring children's education to the color of their skin, their national origins, or their presumed ethnicity is in some fundamental sense contrary to our nation's founding ideals of democracy, equality, and opportunity.

And yet we know that assimilationism by itself is an inadequate strategy for American public education, for two reasons. First, it ignores the strengths that immigrants have to offer; and second, it presumes that American culture is static, which is surely not true. When immigrants arrive in America, they tend to bring with them, often after an emotionally costly journey, a sense of optimism, a strong family and religious tradition, and a willingness to work hard—values and attitudes that our society respects, but that affluence and media cynicism have eroded among many of our own citizens.

But neither is "celebrating diversity" an adequate strategy for a multiracial, multi-ethnic society

like ours. The public schools exist to build an American community, to help both newcomers and native-born children prepare for adulthood as fellow citizens. Strategies that divide children along racial and ethnic lines encourage resentment and alienation rather than mutual respect. The ultimate democratic lesson is human equality, and the schools must teach our children that we are all in the same boat, all members of one society, regardless of race, ethnicity, or place of origin.

We learned that lesson the hardest way possible on September 11, when thousands of people from many countries died together in a single tragedy.

How will America's schools respond in the days ahead? It seems clear that they must make a pact with the children in their care. They must honor the strong and positive values that the children's families bring to America, and in return

they must be prepared to give the children access to the best of America's heritage.

America's newcomers did not come to our shores merely to become consumers. They came to share in our democratic heritage and to become possessors of the grand ideas that created and sustained the democratic experiment in this country for more than two centuries. They too have a contribution to make to the evolving story of our nation. Whether they do so will depend in large part on whether our educational system respects them enough to help them become Americans.

The terrible events of this past fall have shown that Americans of all races and ethnic groups share a tremendous sense of national spirit and civic unity. They recognize that, whatever their origins, they share a common destiny as Americans. America's schools should honor that reality.

POSTNOTE

Diane Ravitch is one of the leading educational thinkers in the United States. Her training as a historian makes her a keen observer of educational trends and an advocate of strengthening student learning in core content subjects. As such, her article is one of our Classic picks.

The tensions Ravitch discusses, between multiculturalism and monoculturalism, between diversity and acculturation, are old and deep in the American schools. Emphasis has shifted back and forth toward one or the other extreme over the years, depending on historical events and, often, the energies of advocates. Currently, because of a huge influx of immigrants into the United States during the 1990s, and fueled by the 9/11 attacks on our country, the emphasis is shifting toward acculturation and a rebirth of patriotism. Nevertheless, this strikes us as

an unnecessary distinction. Our national motto is "E pluribus unum," from the many comes the one. A good school can honor the varied backgrounds of its students and at the same time teach all the requirements and expectations of good citizens. To do less is to miseducate.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How was multiculturalism taught or exhibited in your schooling, and how did students respond to the school's efforts?
2. Have you seen a change in emphasis on either multiculturalism or national acculturation since 9/11?
3. What ideas do you have for dealing with these issues in your classroom?

Diversity Principles in a M

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What do we know about this two-part Consensus Panel? University of Maryland, which the panel in New York, reviewed

The panelists, psychologists, a panel in education. The panelists write reports for group studies and known about taken to solve

The findings call essential principles and practice relevant from both research types of school group skills. And benefit from