

A Response to “The Uncertain Future of MULTICULTURAL SOCIAL STUDIES” by Henry C. Griffith, Sr.

“While the proponents of multicultural education (Banks, 1997; Bennett, 1999; Sleeter & Grant, 1993), share an affirming vision of an approach that is inclusive, empowering, and democratic, its critics (Ravitch, 1998; Schlesinger, 1992) portray it as a trend that is intellectually dishonest and may destroy the common ground on which the foundations of the American system of government rest.”

“Which, then, is the ‘real’ definition of multicultural education? Is it an approach that promotes assimilationist or diverse perspectives in American history? Is it strictly a social studies topic? Or is it a vehicle to promote revisionist theory? Obviously the answer depends on one’s academic, social, or political views.”

“If multicultural social studies is to be rescued from that vast graveyard of discarded educational reforms, it needs immediate and effective resuscitation.”

The above quotes were taken from the “Parting Words” column by Anita C. Danker, which appeared in the June 2002 issue of *MultiCultural Review*. In the column Danker summarized the attitudes of social studies teachers at the secondary level, most of whom expressed confusion regarding the definition of multicultural education and a reluctance to incorporate multicultural perspectives into the curriculum.

As an elementary school principal I find Danker correct in insisting on the importance of saving multicultural social studies, and multicultural education in general, as part of school curricula on the national level. I also appreciate her insistence that the best way for children to come to appreciate this nation’s diversity is for teachers to model that appreciation themselves, not only through the integration of diverse materials into the curriculum but also in their own behavior. For that reason, the attitudes of the teachers she interviewed seemed disturbing, as most felt little personal commitment to including the viewpoints of the diverse peoples involved in the history of our nation.

The responses of the teachers exposed a missing element in the acceptance and implementation of authentic multicultural curricula—the commitment by school and district administrators to the ongoing professional development of teachers. In speaking about such commitment, Dr. Frank W. Hale, Jr. of Ohio State University has often said, “commitment without cash is counterfeit.”

In my long career as a teacher and a school and district administrator, with principalships in Mansfield and Dublin, Ohio, I have sought to encourage and support my various teaching staffs in their efforts to implement a more inclusive curriculum. More fundamentally, however, I have sought to live my life as one committed to the inclusion of all people in American society. I believe that Stephen Covey is correct when he speaks of “walking one’s talk” (1989, 148).

Crucial to my support for teachers is professional development with experts in various fields related to cultural diversity. The Ohio State University has been a wonderful resource in this regard. I encourage principals and district-level administrators to use experts at local universities to help build a school climate that is appreciative of diversity. In my observation, those experts normally begin by creating a nonjudgmental atmosphere of dialogue so that teachers and staff feel comfortable to examine their thoughts and attitudes pertaining to diversity. Such self-examination serves as a crucial starting point.

As the professional development continues, teachers and staff begin to focus their attention on the literature and nonprint materials purchased for classroom and school libraries. They become more skilled at evaluating those materials and more aware of how such materials, integrated across the curriculum, can have a tremendous positive impact on the students. Daily use of authentic, high quality multicultural literature and nonprint materials expands the horizons of young minds beyond the traditional one-month observances of Black History Month and Women’s History Month. Every day becomes a celebration of diversity.

Finally, teachers and staff come to view multicultural education as an idea more dynamic and appropriate to the twenty-first century than the “melting pot” ideology of the previous century. The great Walt Whitman was correct in describing our country as the “varied carols” of America. And more recently, Ronald Takaki has stated that “you can’t spill a drop of American blood, without spilling the blood of the whole world” (1988, 5). How boring and undoubtedly less great as a nation we would be if our differences as “varied carols” had not come together under one flag to build that greatness!

If, then, our diversity has been our strength, why are there strong objections in some quarters to teaching multiculturalism in our schools? Why would anyone consider

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depriving young minds of an understanding of the contributions of a variety of people to that strength? Could it be that it is far better to resist multicultural education as a way to avoid talking about the below-the-surface issues of racism that continue to be a part of our society?

Once we acknowledge the conflicts in our past and present, we can begin to address these conflicts. Educational leaders at the school and district level are in a unique position to initiate this process, in conjunction with experts in local colleges and universities and within the community. Cornel West writes in *Race Matters*:

to engage in a serious discussion of race in America, we must begin not with the problem of black people, but with the flaws of American society; flaws rooted in historic inequalities and long-standing cultural stereotypes. How we set up terms for discussing racial issues shapes our perception and response to these issues. To establish a new framework, we need to begin with a frank acknowledgment of the basic humanness of each of us. And we must acknowledge that as a people, *e pluribus unum*, we are on a slippery slope toward economic strife, social turmoil, and cultural chaos. If we go down, we go down together. There is no escape from our interracial interdependence. (West, 1993, 3-4)

For any of us to ignore what has happened in our past gives us no chance to have honest and problem-solving dialogue today. Danker states that “democracy and difference do not work against each other, but nourish and sustain

each other.” I’ll go further and state that unless educational leaders embrace this thought and implement it on both a professional and a personal level, attitudes of racism and all the other “isms” associated with lack of acceptance will pervade their schools and be perpetuated for generations to come.

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