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Reflections on Multiculturalism

Some Thoughts on the Multicultural Curriculum

Bernardo A. García, Bureau Chief, Florida

Before the curriculum addresses multicultural concerns, it must acknowledge its cultural basis. The content of the curriculum and its structure are culturally derived. The subjects taught, their sequence, the time devoted to each, their prominence, all respond to a cultural imperative. There exists nothing in the curriculum that demands its presence because of any intrinsic value; everything in the curriculum--even the concept of curriculum itself--is bound by culture. A multicultural curriculum starts by recognizing, acknowledging and exploring this fact.

To state the obvious: it is American culture that produces the curriculum. A true understanding of that curriculum may not be achieved without an understanding of the culture that produces it. When a curriculum for Health, as an example, is developed, it first must be acknowledged that "Health," as a concept, is a cultural creation. Some cultures do not distinguish between health and illness, but view life as a unitary process. Among cultures that recognize "Health" as a distinct concept, which its constituents are vary significantly. Some cultures may view physical activity as a component of "Health," other cultures may view inner contentment as the only trademark of a healthy individual. "Health," of course, is related to esthetics. A culture that views a Rubenesque figure as ideal may have quite a different understanding of what constitutes a healthy diet than a culture for which Giacometi figures are the prototype.

Mathematics may be initially viewed as objectively apart from culture but that is not the case. Mathematics develops out of cultural concerns. The ebb and flow of the Nile, the needs for shelter, the needs of agriculture prompted mathematical development. The growth of architecture is related to mathematics as is, more obviously, that of engineering. Mathematics is primarily a philosophical enterprise; there is a long and glorious tradition of mathematician-philosophers from Pythagoras to Bertrand Russell, including Descartes and Pascal. What underlying cultural patterns make continental Europeans comfortable with a metric system that is found so uncongenial in the English-speaking world? How are tithing and the laws of usury related to percentages?

If mathematics may not be viewed outside the realm of culture, neither may science. Is science a more objective instrument for the apperception of reality than religion? Is science outside of man, or is it another reality that is socially constructed? Is science a required underpinning for a democratic society? Is science a more suitable foundation for a democratic society than religion? What is the relationship between Science and technology? May a culture be satisfying that is not supported by science?

A multicultural curriculum would have its grounding in the humanities and the social sciences. Here the concern would be to ensure that valued specificity is not lost to generality. There are some realities that have ultimate significance for American culture and must be ensured inclusion in a multicultural curriculum: colonialism, imperialism, slavery, religious, racial and ethnic intolerance, the Holocaust. How did the

United States develop historically into a society that values the multiculturalism that rends other societies? What are the civic virtues that glue this multicultural society? Where are the civic values of this society enshrined? A multicultural curriculum that is not grounded in an understanding of the civic values that inform the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, the Gettysburg Address, Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech would be a shallow curriculum, one that would not ring true.

Multiculturalism as an informing principle in both life and education runs the risk, to borrow Chesterton's words about Christianity, not of "Being tried and found wanting, but being hard and never tried."

Multicultural Education in America

Multicultural education needs to be founded within the context of American culture. Multicultural education is an education in truth. A true and realistic telling of the American experience must, per force, be a multicultural telling. The American experience began before Plymouth Rock. Plymouth Rock has different meanings for the various protagonists of the American experience. Malcolm X, speaking for Blacks in America is alleged to have said, "We did not land on that rock, that rock landed on us."

The initial reaction to a demand for truth in the telling of the American experience to all students is a concern for beauty. A true tale may not be a pretty tale. But beauty that is not true is fake and no beauty at all. Some women have a striking beauty even if their features taken separately may not be thought of as perfect, may even be described as ugly. Those same features, individually, would not be thought of as beautiful in other countenances. Yet those features, when uniquely combined in some faces, produce results usually described as striking. It's the same with the American experience: some of its features may be assessed as indifferent, ugly, even cruel, yet when combined into the unique journey that is America, they result in a countenance that portrays not only beauty but strength and purpose. The truth of the American experience, the essence of multiculturalism, shall indeed "make us free."

There is no "other." The goal of multiculturalism is the triumph of the idea that we all are Americans while each has a unique way of being so. The aim of multiculturalism is not understanding "them," but understanding ourselves.

Multicultural Materials

Multicultural materials must be both accurate and significant. Multicultural education is not promoted by picturing members of minority groups in the background of group portraits of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Such portraiture, even if it were true, would be irrelevant.

What would be relevant in a discussion of the Declaration of Independence would be a study of the influences that shaped the framers. What contributions did the theories of Montesquieu make to Jefferson's thinking? It would also be relevant to study the impact of the Declaration of Independence on the independence movement in Latin America, on the independence of Haiti, the first country to achieve its independence in the Americas following the American Revolution.

American history and literature, nay, American culture is multicultural. Textbooks must reflect accurately such multiculturalism: Spanish and French, as well as English contributions to the exploration and colonization of the territory that is now the United States, the history of slavery, the history of immigration, the history of conquest, as in the Mexican War.

The conspicuous sprinkling of conspicuous representatives of various ethnic groups throughout a textbook is not multiculturalism but tokenism. Such tokenism serves only to perpetuate stereotypes: not all Latinos look alike: they belong to all races, there is no one way to look or be Latino.

In short, a textbook is multicultural only when it tells it like it was, to reflect what it is, to promote what it shall be.

The ESOL initiative has fostered multiculturalism by:

Recognizing a student's language background as an asset rather than a liability when the background is in a language other than English.

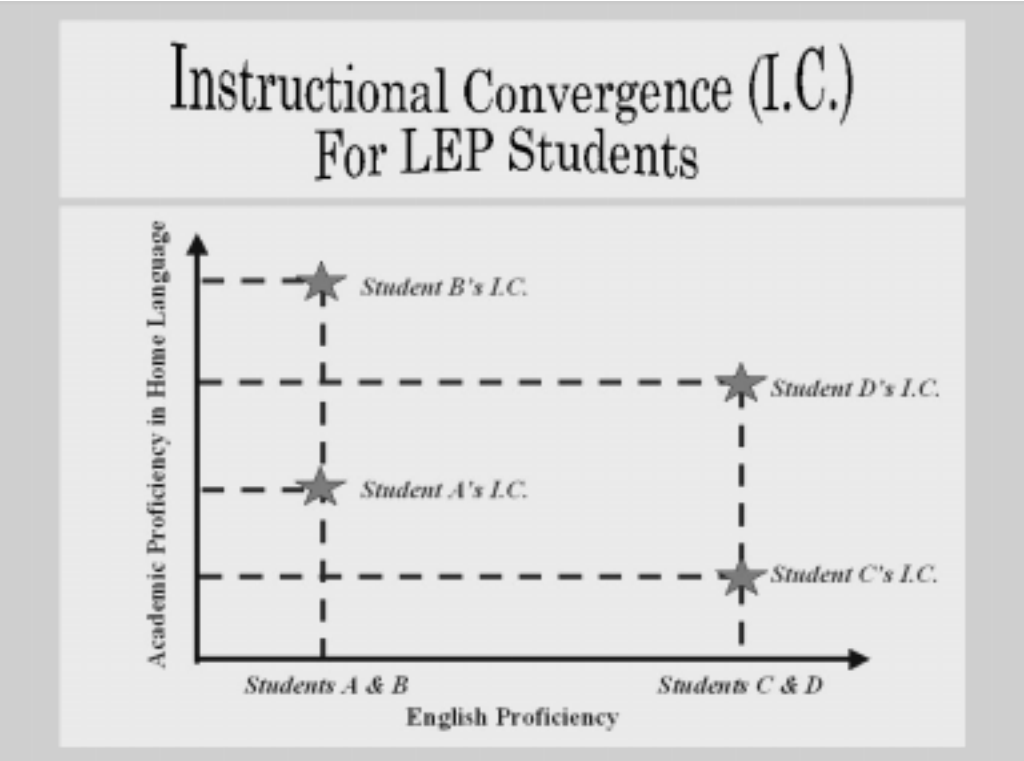
By requiring comprehensible instruction that is also comprehensive for all students.

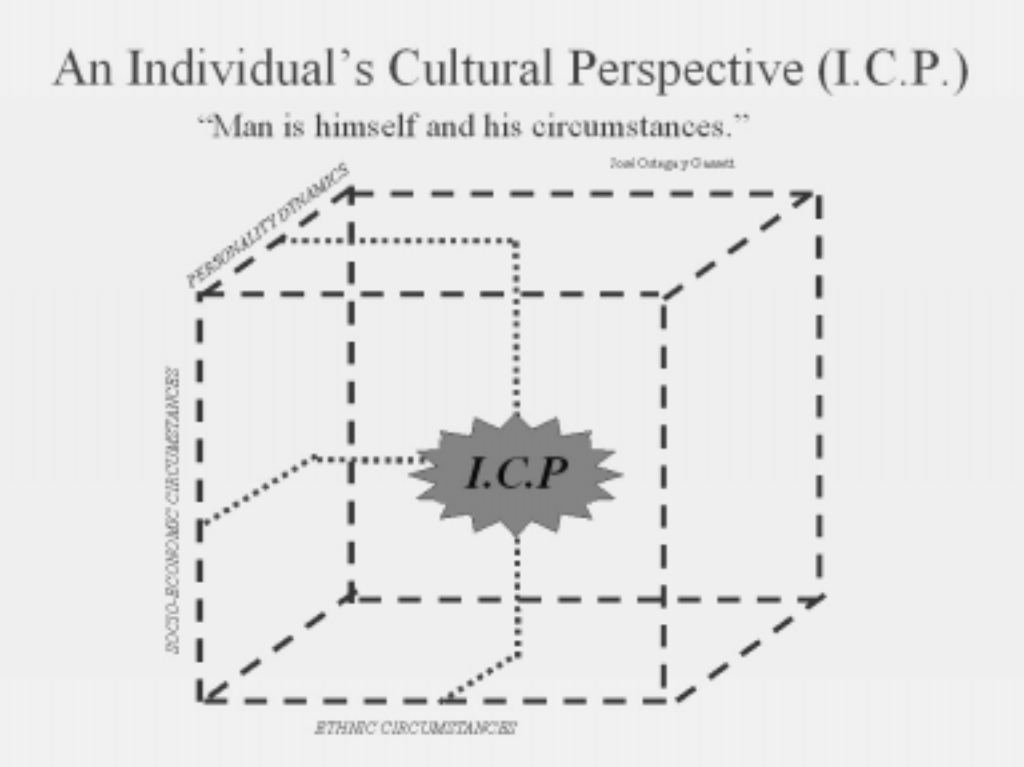
By providing extensive inservice to instructional and administrative personnel that emphasized cross-cultural diversity and understanding as well as the language component of culture.

By recognizing that an individual's self is always a cultural self and that in the United States that self is, per se, a multicultural self

Multicultural Education

Is About:	**Is *Not* About:**
Inclusion	Separation
Equal Opportunities	Special Entitlements
Common Rights & Responsibilities	Particular Privileges
Shared Experiences	Individual Grievances
Explaining “Us” to Ourselves	Explaining “Them” to “Us”


Instructional Convergence (I.C.)
For LEP Students
Academic Proficiency in Home Language
Student B's I.C.
Student D's I.C.
Student A's I.C.
Student C's I.C.
Students A & B
Students C & D
English Proficiency


An Individual's Cultural Perspective (I.C.P.)
"Man is himself and his circumstances."
José Ortega y Gasset
PERSONALITY DYNAMICS
SOCIO-ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES
I.C.P
ETHNIC CIRCUMSTANCES


A Multicultural Ladder
Celebration
Appreciation
Acceptance
Tolerance