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Approaches to Multicultural Curriculum Reform*

by
James A. Banks

The Contributions Approach

Several identifiable approaches to the integration of ethnic content into the curriculum have evolved since the 1960s. The Contributions Approach to integration is one of the most frequently used and is often used extensively during the first phase of an ethnic revival movement. This approach is characterized by the addition of ethnic heroes into the curriculum that are selected using criteria similar to those used to select mainstream heroes for inclusion into the curriculum. The mainstream curriculum remains unchanged in terms of its basic structure, goals, and salient characteristics.

The Heroes and Holidays Approach is a variant of the Contributions Approach. In this approach, ethnic content is limited primarily to special days, weeks and months related to ethnic events and celebrations. *Cinco de Mayo*, Martin Luther King's Birthday, and Black History Week are examples of ethnic days and weeks that are celebrated in the schools. During these celebrations, teachers involve students in lessons, experiences, and pageants related to the ethnic groups being commemorated. When this approach is used, the class studies little or nothing about the ethnic groups before or after the special event or occasion.

The Contributions Approach is the easiest approach for teachers to use to integrate the curriculum with ethnic content. However, it has several serious limitations. Students do not attain a global view of the role of ethnic and cultural groups in U.S. society. Rather, they see ethnic issues and events primarily as an addition to the curriculum, and consequently as an appendage to the main story of the development of the nation and to the core curriculum in the language arts, the social studies, the arts, and to other subject areas. The teaching of ethnic issues with the use of heroes, holidays, and contributions also tends to gloss over important concepts and issues related to the victimization and oppression of ethnic groups and their struggles against racism and for power. Issues such as racism, poverty, and oppression tend to be evaded in the Contributions Approach to curriculum integration. The focus, rather, tends to be on success and the validation of the Horatio Alger myth that every American who



is willing to work hard can go from rags to riches and pull himself or herself up by the bootstrap.

The Contributions Approach often results in the trivialization of ethnic cultures, the study of their strange and exotic characteristics, and the reinforcement of stereotypes and misconceptions. When the focus is on the contributions and unique aspects of ethnic cultures, students are not helped to understand them as complete and dynamic wholes.

The Ethnic Additive Approach

Another important approach to the integration of ethnic content to the curriculum is the addition of content, concepts, themes, and perspectives to the curriculum without changing its basic structure, purposes, and characteristics. The Additive Approach is often accomplished by the addition of a book, a unit, or a course to the curriculum without changing it substantially.

The Additive Approach allows the teacher to put ethnic content into the curriculum without restructuring it, which takes substantial time, effort, training, and rethinking of the curriculum and its purposes, nature, and goals. The Additive Approach can be the first phase in a more radical curriculum reform effort designed to restructure the total curriculum and to integrate it with ethnic content, perspectives, and frames of reference. However, this approach shares several disadvantages with the Contributions Approach. Its most important shortcoming is that it usually results in the viewing of eth-

nic content from the perspectives of mainstream historians, writers, artists, and scientists because it does not involve a restructuring of the curriculum. The events, concepts, issues, and problems selected for study are selected using Mainstream-Centric and Euro-Centric criteria and perspectives. When teaching a unit such as “The Westward Movement” in a fifth grade U.S. History class, the teacher may integrate her unit by adding content about the Lakota (Sioux) Indians. However, the unit remains Mainstream-Centric and focused because of its perspective and point of view. A unit called “The Westward Movement” is Mainstream and Euro-Centric because it focuses on the movement of European Americans from the eastern to the western part of the United States. The Lakota Indians were already in the West and consequently were not moving West. The unit might be called, “The Invasion from the East,” from the point of view of the Lakota. An objective title for the unit might be, “Two Cultures Meet in the Americas.”

The Additive Approach also fails to help students to view society from diverse cultural and ethnic perspectives and to understand the ways in which the histories and cultures of the nation’s diverse ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious groups are inextricably bound.

The Transformation Approach

The Transformation Approach differs fundamentally from the Contributions and Additive Approaches. This approach changes the basic assumptions of the curriculum and enables students to view concepts, issues, themes, and problems from several ethnic perspectives and points of view. The key curriculum issue involved in the Transformation Approach is not the addition of a long list of ethnic groups, heroes, and contributions, but the infusion of various perspectives, frames of reference, and content from various groups that will extend students’ understandings of the nature, development, and complexity of U.S. society. When students are studying the Revolution in the British colonies, the perspectives of the Anglo Revolutionaries, the Anglo Loyalists, Afro-Americans, Indians, and the British are essential for them to attain a thorough understanding of this significant event in U.S. history. Students must study the various and sometimes divergent meanings of the Revolution to these diverse groups to fully understand it.

When studying U.S. history, language, music, arts, science, and mathematics, the emphasis should not be on the ways in which various ethnic and cul-

tural groups have “contributed” to mainstream U.S. society and culture. The emphasis, rather, should be on how the common U.S. culture and society emerged from a complex synthesis and interaction of the diverse cultural elements that originated within the various cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious groups that make up American society. One of the ironies of conquest is that those who are conquered often deeply influence the cultures of the conquerors.

The Decision-Making and Social Action Approach

This approach includes all of the elements of the Transformation Approach but adds components that require students to make decisions and to take actions related to the concept, issue, or problem they have studied in the unit. In this approach, students study a social problem such as, “What actions should we take to reduce prejudice and discrimination in our school?” They gather pertinent data, analyze their values and beliefs, synthesize their knowledge and values, and identify alternative courses of action, and finally decide what, if any, actions they will take to reduce prejudice and discrimination in their school. Major goals of the Decision-Making and Social Action Approach are to teach students thinking and decision-making skills, to empower them, and to help them acquire a sense of political efficacy.

Mixing and Blending the Approaches

The four approaches to the integration of ethnic content into the curriculum that I have described are often mixed and blended in actual teaching situations. One approach, such as the Contributions Approach, can also be used as a vehicle to move to other and more intellectually challenging approaches, such as the Transformation and the Decision-Making and Social Actions Approaches. It is not realistic to expect a teacher to move directly from a highly Mainstream-Centric curriculum to one that focuses on decision making and social action. Rather, the move from the first to the higher levels of ethnic content integration into the curriculum is likely to be gradual and cumulative (see figure on page 19).

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Levels of Integration of Ethnic Content

