

Point of View

National Standards: A Common Purpose

H. Michael Hartoonian

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Within the social studies community there seems to be confusion about the role of Content Area National Standards. We seem to believe that the several academic subjects of social studies should compete with one another, and disregard the notion that they might serve a common purpose.

A common or shared purpose can unify even the most profound differences. We cannot, however, come to the promise of shared purpose until we overcome an old divisive idea. In medieval Europe there existed a notion that came to be known as the concept of the limited good. This idea asserted that there was only so much good to go around, and if someone or some group was better than someone else, some other group would have to be less good or evil.

Separation and fragmentation are loose upon the contemporary landscape and within the academic community. These lead one to ask: If we cannot bring our own disciplines together, how can we expect to bring diverse citizens and our republic together? How can *e pluribus unum* have meaning in a context best described as subject area imperialism?

Perhaps the best way to think about this issue of unity and diversity is to reinvent a common purpose.

- Why do we want our students to understand and practice geographic, historical, civic, economic, social, and ethical literacy?
- Why do we want our children to develop the habits of the scholar, the artisan, the leader, and the enlightened citizen?

The intrinsic abilities and characteristics in these questions can provide a clue to our common purpose. That purpose is best stated as the survival of the republic. Our common purpose is to provide every student with the keys to open reservoirs of knowledge and create the quality of character necessary for our survival. The foundation of our nation is built on the belief in the intelligence, ability, integrity, and cooperative spirit of our citizens. This foundation can

be constructed only by citizens acquainted with the reservoirs of knowledge locked in the separate and integrated academic subjects of the social studies.

Achieving this common purpose will take the cooperation of all of us. We can no longer afford to hold to the concept of the limited good.

The several standards in history, geography, civics, economics, and social studies should be used together under the umbrella of social studies. In fact, the social studies standards encourage educators to use the other standards as state and local curriculum and assessment designs are developed. The social studies standards provide the general curriculum contours and content themes, whereas the other academic standards provide necessary content details. Together, we can implement programs that will open the knowledge reservoirs to our students. Separately, we will frustrate our several good intentions and end up implementing only the concept of the limited good. We can and must do better.

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A Response to the NCSS Guidelines on Multicultural Education

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The NCSS Task Force on Ethnic Studies Guidelines, published in the September 1992 *Social Education*, remind social studies teachers across the United States of their critical role in developing and delivering multicultural education.

The choice of James Banks as chief author of the revised guidelines brings a notable voice of reason and stability to a subject that has of late often involved bitter debate over the meaning of multiculturalism. Professor Banks has said many times in public forums that extreme forms of multiculturalism challenge the credibility of more moderate advocates who view it as an opportunity to improve the education of all children rather than the promo-

tion of one or another ideology. Professor Banks has done much to introduce the notion of multicultural education into the national consciousness, and to sustain support for a humane education in a diverse society.

In our work with eleven major urban districts and three statewide rural programs, we have focused primarily on curricular changes to enhance multicultural content and understanding. In a decade of such work under the aegis of the Rockefeller Foundation's Collaboratives for Humanities and Arts Teaching (CHART), we have experienced the triumphs and the difficulties inherent in trying to reform just one aspect of public schooling.

Our purpose here is to discuss the guidelines in the spirit of enriching the conversation. Based on our experience, we want to raise questions that will stimulate NCSS members to continue the search for ways of teaching children about the meaning of diversity in the United States and the world. It is our hope that these thoughts will be of help in moving this agenda forward.

The Difficulties of Definitions

A major problem with designing good multicultural policies is the myriad dimensions of the term. It is possible to treat learning styles, tracking, the content of teaching, the hidden curriculum expressed through extracurricular activities, social patterns and expectations in schools, and many other issues all under the single topic of multicultural education. Indeed, all things pertaining to what it is to be human are possible under this heading. Many reformers see multicultural education as an opportunity for widespread reforms of both school and society. Yet, in an effort to deal comprehensively with these many variants, the NCSS guidelines may overwhelm rather than enlighten practitioners.

In his admirable effort to be a voice of reason on a variety of perspectives, Professor Banks largely defines multicultural education in terms of resolving social and political conflict rather than in terms of engaging educators on the content and nature of the academic subjects. He suggests that three approaches to multiculturalism (the Western Traditionalists, the Afrocentrists, and the Multiculturalists)

should share power and propose what should be taught. We are not persuaded that one can categorize individuals so neatly into these categories. There are multiple differences within each group, and we work with many teachers who transcend these perspectives.

In addition, the suggestion reads as if curriculum decisions are similar to passing a piece of legislation that requires compromise prior to enactment into law. We would not deny the role of a variety of pressure groups on curriculum decisions. However, it is our hope that well-informed professionals who have the academic knowledge and capacity to develop a consensus of purpose regarding multicultural education will heavily influence these decisions. The NCSS guidelines could suggest that each of the three groups would choose one-third of the curriculum. We do not believe that this is the most thoughtful way of determining content.

Distinguishing Between Multicultural and International Education

In our judgment, the guidelines inadvertently contribute to a common misunderstanding about the relationship between multicultural and international education. By focusing the guidelines on the diversity of the United States and underemphasizing the need to understand cultures outside of our territorial boundaries, Professor Banks has reinforced the belief that multicultural education is "over here" whereas international education is "over there."

In truth, the lines between cultural diversity at home and abroad are increasingly artificial in all aspects of life, including trade and commerce, science and technology, and culture, ethics, and politics. Cultural interconnections are far more complicated and less understood by U.S. citizens than is revealed by unilateral thinking about our internal problems in isolation from the rest of the world. In this context, the NCSS guidelines fail to capture the rich complexities of cross-cultural influences in both national and global settings.

If we look at just a few examples from the arts and humanities, we quickly see the complexities of cross-cultural influences: (1) the filming of Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* took place on three continents; (2) Africa influenced Picasso's paintings and Joseph Conrad's novels; (3) Western realism

influenced the plays of August Wilson; (4) Chinese culture influenced eighteenth-century France; (5) Confucius and Lao-tzu influenced the poetry of Ezra Pound; (6) Latin American music pervades the work of Leonard Bernstein and Aaron Copland; and (7) United States history plays a major role in the novels of Carlos Fuentes while Fuentes, in turn, influences our perceptions of U.S. history. Perhaps above all we must remember that the Americanization of global mass culture is very much an African-Americanization of the world's youth. These are but randomly chosen figures and works that are worthy of any good, multicultural education which simultaneously explores subjects that transcend nationalism as well as other such categories.

A related concern is that the NCSS guidelines on multicultural education may contribute to the notion that international studies is only about career advancement and strengthening the U.S. economy and that multicultural studies is essentially about a guilt-ridden response to past discrimination. Neither of these approaches places a high value on a deeper understanding of cultures and what multiple cultures can teach us about ourselves in relationship to others both at home and abroad. In a sense, all of the arts are always about "otherness," and always allow us entrée to new ways of seeing, thinking, feeling, and believing. The arts and humanities are essential and basic, therefore, to multicultural education.

The guidelines do not challenge the misconceptions of educators who think of multicultural education as a field of study for the urban poor and international education as a field of study for privileged or sophisticated students. Such pervasive assumptions in the nation's public schools are a form of class and race prejudice that results in a tracking system that gives at-risk children a narrow and unchallenging curriculum. Equally important, such thinking isolates all students from the true complexity of the United States and the world.

Multicultural Education Should Emphasize Intellectual and Academic Goals

All of these issues culminate in our final and perhaps most important concern with the guidelines—the overemphasis on the social and political goals of schools at the expense of the intellectual and acade-

mic purposes of education. The weight of the guidelines seems to concentrate on multiculturalism's contribution to personal well-being, the survival of democracy, and intergroup understanding, while underemphasizing the development of children's minds. Although we certainly support all of the goals listed in the guidelines for school reform, we believe schools will more likely achieve the goals if schools pay more attention to the need for powerful mental development for all children. Multiculturalism as an intellectual tool to teach children how to think, how to learn, how to make judgments, how to create knowledge, and how to participate actively in a transnational culture of the educated: that should clearly stand as the central purpose of our public schools.

Schools cannot engineer solutions to every personal, social, and political problem. What they can do best is to provide opportunities for students to engage in meaningful intellectual activity that is personally engaging, rewarding, intellectually challenging, and democratic, and that enables students to prepare for an unknown future. In this sense, all education must be multicultural at base—must be the place in which multiculturalism leads private individuals into the public world through discovery of what is "other," and the place where the transaction between the private and public occurs through negotiating meanings and interpretations of diverse texts.

The Role of the Arts and Humanities

We believe the arts and humanities are fundamental to this agenda, but only if we do not ask the arts and humanities to serve only the social purposes of education. The humanities are the disciplined development of the verbal and imaginative skills needed to perceive and understand ourselves and others, past and present, from all cultures. Because the humanities always put us in touch with other voices from our own and other cultures, they are by their very nature multicultural. Every voice, every vision enumerated in an art work, a poem, a dance, a historical narrative, a philosophy entails a transaction between the knowledge the student already possesses and what the new voices or visions urge the student to accommodate.

At their best, the arts and humanities provide students with opportunities to study a text, not a textbook. A text could

be a poem or novel, a diary, a slave narrative, the U.S. Constitution, a passage from the Bible or the Koran, or a dance. The examples are endless and come from all times, places, and cultures within the United States and other countries.

The arts and humanities can lead students to create their own texts, and hence their own culture, in a context that strengthens traditional academic values. In a unit on Western expansion, fifth-grade students in an all-black school in Hartford created dialogues between a white settler and an American Indian after having read the memoirs of these individuals who, in real life, never met. The children learned to read and interpret primary sources carefully and, in addition, learned the consequences of fear and stereotyping, a concern of the NCSS guidelines.

In an integrated high school class of average students in St. Louis, students immersed themselves in primary and secondary accounts of political revolutions in South Africa, Central Africa, and Eastern Europe and then created a series of performances that illuminated the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe. The individual performances, which included reports, games, poetry, plays, songs, panel discussions, art pieces, and media events were condensed into a one-hour presentation for a summer institute for teachers and for a national conference. The students created their own interpretation of history, but only after having read and studied authentic historical accounts of important events. The students acquired in-depth knowledge about the struggles of people in the non-Western world that challenged the Eurocentric perspectives of intellectually isolated students.

In an all-black, seventh-grade remedial reading class in Little Rock, Arkansas, students were required to read several short stories about Africa and to complete a research paper on a selected country in Africa. They had to form groups and create a skit about what might happen if a student from Africa should visit the school. The excellent student skits, which captured the complexities of intercultural communication, were followed by serious discussions of the consequences of prejudging people from another country. The students integrated the skills of reading, writing, and acting with knowledge of history, fiction, and culture.

In these cases, academic expectations were high. The humanities provided a context for students to read authentic texts and to use their imagination to place their stamp on history. In addition, and as a by-product of interactive, cooperative methods of instruction, the lessons served the socialization goals of multicultural education. The social good, however, could not have been met had not the students first become engaged in the reading and sophisticated interpretation of a variety of texts.

We could cite many more examples that are multicultural by most people's definitions and that also draw from several disciplines, including history. What is so striking is that the students created new interpretations of the texts for themselves, their peers, and their communities and then constructed narratives that argued for their interpretations. Their intellectual development gave rise to social development.

The kind of powerful education we advocate has not generally been available to most American school children, and particularly so for minorities and the poor at any time in our history. Let us take the opportunity that diversifying our curriculum offers to transform it into a powerful mechanism for the mental development of all our children. Schools that respect children's cultural knowledge and dignity and offer them opportunities to extend their knowledge outward through diverse arts and humanities will help those children grow up capable of transforming the social and political fabric of our troubled nation and world.

We want to thank James Banks and the NCSS Task Force for taking a stand on this vitally important conversation. We hope that the questions raised regarding the multiple purposes of multicultural education, the categorizing of perspectives, the interrelationships of multicultural and international education, and the multicultural nature of the arts and humanities will stimulate further discussion among all educators.

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