Quality is in no way equivalent to prominence

Multi-cultural education, a need for conceptual clarification: further remarks

by Robert P. Craig

I

Whatever else may be said of it, culture has chiefly to do with the symbols and other vehicles of expression used to achieve and to sustain both commonality and distinctness in human relationships in a social setting. As John Greenway wrote, "Anthropology has only recently discovered the concept of culture; it has not yet had time to explain it."[1] Our provisional characterization of culture is intended to point toward the development of an adequate explanation as a further means of illuminating multi-cultural experience. What we will consider below are insights about multi-cultural experience drawn from numerous partial explanatory efforts available not only from anthropology, but from philosophy, biology, sociology, psychology and other fields as well. And that's quite a task!

Not everything that goes on in a particular human relationship is cultural. Only those uses of symbols and other vehicles of expression are cultural that take shape within particular social settings and that are thereby shaped by social factors within those settings. Rather than emphasize the universal or the special, the general or the particular aspects in separation from each other, we shall consider the common elements of experience wherever and however they may appear. This will not tell us

Robert P. Craig is chairman of the Philosophy Department at St. Mary's College, Michigan.

what culture is; but it will aid in developing a few insights into multi-cultural education.

Nor shall we come to understand what any cultural phenomenon is about in merely general terms. Just as a psychoanalytic patient can never be accurately understood merely as an example of some theoretical category, neither can the more extensive phenomena of culture. The dynamics by which both the more common and the more distinctive elements are achieved must be attended to, as must the mechanisms by which these are maintained—especially those by which conflicts between the various elements are dealt with. I am not suggesting that sociocultural phenomena are to be understood in precisely the same way as individual experience, only that the two investigative processes are similarly complex because human beings are the subject in question. Furthermore, the investigators are themselves bound to bring their own individuality and their own cultural identity into either process of inquiry.

II

Culture is to be seen as a complex, variable system of symbols and other vehicles of expression, as a system by which communication takes place and community is formed. As the system becomes more complex, schooling becomes increasingly important as a social medium for cultural maintenance and achievement. "Schooling" is defined as any formal social organization that exists for the purpose of education. "Education" is briefly defined as any process conducive to human growth in which the affected individuals are themselves active participants.[2]

Yet some forms of socialization in schools have little to do with actual human relationships because they rely on fake abstractions, such as inappropriate labeling, racism, for instance; or because they purvey symbols that have lost their meaning in relation to current experience; or because they can only be applied in ways alien to reality. These forms of socialization are cultural to a very low degree, if at all.

Other forms of socialization are valid for relatively non-cultural purposes but could become cultural in later experience. For example, computer games, historical surveys and technological forecasts can all be used to present a range of possible social interactions. Even though no recommendations for action can be made in any given instance, definite boundaries are inevitably set.

To that extent, the student may be socialized into a more or less limited set of possible social interactions, insofar as he/she is unable to move beyond that set by any other means. The student is not necessarily locked into a particular set as he/she enters into new relationships, but the individual is unquestionably limited by previous socializing influences. Since the vehicles of expression by which the student **could** communicate or form community within the new relationships are not yet present, culture as we have characterized it is, as yet, inchoate at best. Nevertheless, a definite socializing process has occurred and may affect the direction that cultural expression eventually takes to a considerable extent.

Children's books present particularly notable examples of all these distinctions. A child could be so limited in the various socializing influences through available books and other media, and so impoverished in his/her repertoire of cultural means of expression, as to emerge from schooling with very little cultural advantage.

A person in an extremely disturbed schizophrenic state will be in a similar fix, even though the individual might otherwise be quite learned, because he/she has a low capacity for genuine human relationship and is deficient in the closely related capacity to sublimate instinctual drives by cultural means.[3] The person will use some of the products of culture, without being able to share cultural life with others. The individual may contribute to culture, in the sense that the person brings forth material that can be used by others for cultural purposes—while in the individual's own split-off life he/she is virtually bereft of culture. In boycotting the world, in refusing to develop human relationships, the person effectively withdraws from genuine cultural experience as well.

III

What does all this have to do with the school? How can the school be an effective agent of socialization? I believe John Dewey had important insights into such questions. Though in quite general perspective, Dewey has shrewdly analyzed the "cultural quality" problem in schooling by distinguishing four special functions of a school within a complex society.[4]

The first function is to provide a simplified environment, one in which the complex life around the student is broken into fairly fundamental and manageable portions. These are presented in a way that permits interaction by the student in a manner appropriate to the person's stage of cognitive-affective development. They are progressively ordered to move from the more simple to the more complex. Already at this elementary level, selections are being made so that the student's learning is not a haphazard affair. Multi-cultural objectives are called for, moreover, not just because a given society might be ethnically pluralistic, but because it is complex throughout. Criteria are also suggested at this level that begin to form a pattern for such objectives.

The second function of the school for Dewey is to serve as the chief agency of the society for selecting the best, especially what will make for a better future society. These things are reinforced; what is relatively undesirable is excluded, so as to establish a purified social medium for action.

Obvious dangers lurk here, as in any public context where value judgments are being made. The attempt, cannot, however, be avoided, because value judgments of this sort will be made in any case. In setting multi-cultural objectives, further criteria must be established that will indicate a range of approaches and experiences within which the more highly valuable cultural elements can be explored and reinforced. Within a more open and democratic society, the list would have to begin with modes of genuinely appreciating diverse ways of experiencing the world through different cultural means.

Dewey's third function of a school within a complex society is to provide some balance among the various elements that exist within the social environment, so that each individual can escape from the limitations of a more narrow inherited environment, can fruitfully mingle with people of other backgrounds and can unite with them in activity toward common aims. In this respect, multi-cultural objectives would not support bland assimilation, a uniformity that lacks respect for differences of belief, custom and identity and does not know what to do with those differences. Nor would it support strict separation, in which individuals are encouraged to form factions and to reside there without any regard for alternative ways of life.

A fourth function is to enable the individual to coordinate the diverse influences of the many social environments he/she may enter, a steady and integrating experience that brings the simplifying, selecting and balancing functions to fulfillment. In setting multi-cultural objectives with all these basic functions of schooling in mind, it is important to recall Dewey's depiction of a social environment as consisting of all "the activities of fellow beings that are bound up in the carrying out of the activities of any one of its members."[5] If this action-laden picture is superimposed upon the characterization of culture in terms of the development of human relationships, we shall have to search beyond such broad categories as "Black," "middle class," and "Chicano" in order to find the material toward which multi-cultural objectives may be appropriately directed.

IV

These functions and the several types of criteria for setting multi-cultural objectives would appear to be indispensable if there is to be a creatively intelligent approach to multi-cultural education in the schools.[6] Clearly, the recommended process moves far away from the time-worn plea for assimilation—this only ends in uniformity and elitism. As Dewey himself well knew, in a more open and democratic society the surprises, the blendings, the new encounters are just as important as the more settled elements. Multi-cultural education in such a setting must foster these things and must provide means for their critical assessment.

The so-called "little things" often count most, because they are often the best indicators of what is humanely most significant. Therefore, to leave them out in the interest of covering only what is most prominent in cultural experience is to imperil the entire effort. Quality, in short, is in no way equivalent to prominence. At this very moment, for example, I am emphasizing the "little things"—like gestures of friendliness, the nuances of dress and what we carry around in our pockets—through some of the symbols at my disposal and in order to spark a possibility of relationship between us. This is a cultural act done within a highly intellectual social setting and with marked feeling. Nonetheless, the point is tucked away in the midst of a longer discourse and, at this particular time, must be elevated from that discourse in order to gain the high importance it deserves. It, like much of multi-cultural experience, is a "little thing" in momentary appearance only.

Footnotes

1) John Greenway, **The Inevitable Americans.** (New York: Knoph, 1964), p. 68.

2) The distinction among educational settings, processes, and aims or products is elaborated on by Terrence Tice in "Alternatives in Education: A Framework for Inquiry," in **Alternative Education in a Pluralistic Society,** edited by Charles Moody, et. al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1973), pp. 1-12.

3) These aspects of schizophrenia are noted by R.D. Laing. See, **The Politics of the Family and Other Essays.** (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

4) John Dewey, **Democracy and Education.** (New York: Macmillan Company, 1966), pp. 20-22. In a sense, Dewey's entire book actually constitutes a development of these themes.

5) **Ibid.,** p. 22.

6) I have elaborated on this in Robert P. Craig, "Multi-Cultural Education," a Need for Conceptual Clarification." **Educational Considerations,** Vol. IX, Number 2 (Spring 1982), pp. 2-4.