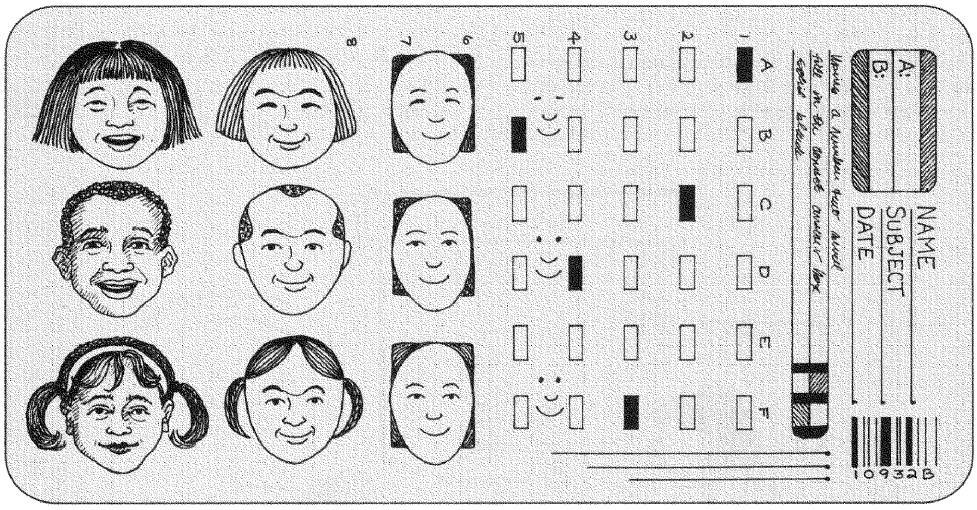
Multicultural Education And the Standards Movement

A Report from the Field

There is a very real possibility, the authors warn, that the current obsession with standardizing curricula and measuring output will further reduce teacher agency and further marginalize segments of our society that are already seriously cheated by the system. It is time to exert pressure on state legislatures to attend to these issues.

BY ANITA PERNA BOHN AND CHRISTINE E. SLEETER



A RECENT study of multicultural education and elementary school teachers in a large Midwestern school district, conducted by Anita Bohn, has detected early warning signs that the multicultural education reform movement is in peril. Between its inception in late 1997 and its conclusion in the early months of 1999, this study documented a marked decline in teacher and administrator concern about multicultural education.

The culprit? Both teachers and administrators in the school district blame new state standards and anticipated state assessments, which have put pressure on school districts to standardize and emphasize content at the expense of any other concerns. Conversations we have had with colleagues around the country suggest that this is not an isolated phenomenon. Multicultural education appears to be in very real danger of getting shelved as the preoccupation with national and state standards and testing intensifies.

Those monitoring the effects of the standards movement on multicultural education are deeply concerned that the development of new standards is occurring in an increasingly repressive climate. In California, for example, the successive passage of Propositions 187, 209, and 227 reflects a climate of growing xenophobia. Many observers believe that propositions such as these are being used to legitimate ignoring the issues that marginalized groups face and the strategies that have worked in empowering marginalized communities. Some California school administrators, for example, have been heard to comment that, now that Proposition 227 has passed, bilingual education teachers are no longer needed. This attitude, of course, ignores the fact that the children are still there, the issues are still there, and the professional and community knowledge about effective strategies is still there.[1] Informal reports from the field indicate that California is not unique in this trend.

State-mandated curriculum standards are clearly the order of the day. Every state except Iowa is either developing or has already established curriculum standards, and the vast majority of states also have formal assessments linked to their standards. It will take time, however, before the real extent of the impact of enforceable curriculum standards on multicultural education is known. We hope that this knowledge will not come too late to avoid wiping out the progress that has been made in democratizing and pluralizing education.

How Standards Interact With Multicultural Education

The interaction of standards and multicultural education is complex. Although we are deeply concerned that the standards movement today is subverting multicul-

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Illustration by Linda Weatherly

tural education, we want to state up front that standards per se are not necessarily antithetical to multicultural education. Standards can call attention to multiculturalism and can actually open up space for people to address it. When one of the authors was in Wisconsin, her university position was a direct result of a set of state requirements that teacher preparation programs provide teachers with a background in multicultural education. Nebraska, to cite another example, has a state requirement that the K-12 curriculum address multiculturalism, a mandate that has caused school districts to decide what that will mean and how to develop training in multicultural education. Standards can open up that kind of discourse.

Standards can also make explicit what students will be tested on, a detail that may help parents and community leaders at least know what the "game" is and what the students will be judged on. As Lisa Delpit has noted, "If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier."[2] To some extent, standards make visible the expectations for learning that otherwise were implicit. Observations such as these make it difficult to state that the standards movement is an unqualified step backward. In a conservative and increasingly xenophobic climate, though, there is good cause to be concerned.

Some Problems That Standards Pose

Standards operate on the assumption that all students have an equal opportunity to learn. In reality, the playing field is anything but level. Enormous discrepancies exist among facilities, resources, and teachers in public schools — even within the same city or the same state — as a function of where one can afford to live. We would be deluding ourselves to think that curriculum standards alone will ensure that everyone receives the same education. Michael Apple has called the standards movement "reform on the cheap." Apple and a good many others warn that standards-based assessments in the face of current methods of school funding will only serve to widen the gap between social classes in this country.[3]

The standards movement's preoccupation with measurement is one of its most troubling aspects. There is a saying that, if you want a baby to grow, you should concentrate on feeding it rather than measuring it. If one focuses mainly on feeding and measures periodically to make sure the baby is growing, the practice can be helpful. But (to push the analogy) feeding a baby requires attending to many critical factors, such as what foods the baby actually needs to thrive, what foods are available, what the baby likes and dislikes, and what the baby is attempting to communicate about the feeding. Standardizing "output" measurements (growth, in this example) tends to lead people toward standardizing "inputs" (food) and framing human variation as a problem to be contained. In the case of schools, the "input" that the movement toward standardization leads educators to standardize is the curriculum; the rich human variations of children and of pluralism then become problems to be minimized.

The means that schools have at their disposal for standardizing the curriculum only seem to bring with them new problems. The large Midwestern school district in Bohn's recent study has taken a very common approach to standardizing curriculum: it has purchased new textbooks that it feels reflect the thrust of the standards in each subject. The authors' experiences with publishers' textbook series, regrettably, do not inspire the same confidence in this path to curricular reform.

Education needs to be about developing powers of thinking. This process should include developing the ability to ask good questions; to find and evaluate information; to analyze it, use it, and communicate it in a wide variety of ways. With the information explosion on the Internet, the need for these information-gathering and critical-thinking skills is all the more urgent. Textbooks can offer students only limited pieces of predigested knowledge, to be learned as if they were immutable facts.

Because publishing companies seek large market shares, textbooks have always been written in such a way as to be as noncontroversial as possible. In 1991, Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant analyzed 41 commonly used elementary textbooks; they found the approach to multiculturalism to be largely cosmetic and acknowledgment of substantive diversity in viewpoints and experience to be virtually absent.[4] Bohn's review of the 1997 and 1998 textbook series in elementary mathematics and social studies that had been purchased by the large school district in her study to address state standards revealed little substantive change.

Some high-profile representations of diversity are evident in the new texts. Virtually every illustrated page in the math series, for example, includes a person of color from some walk of life, from student and teacher to doctor and merchant. Biographies of noteworthy women and people of color have been added to the social studies series, but these are optional materials, separate from the main texts. Multicultural literary connections to social studies and to mathematics are suggested within the texts, but the actual literature is a separate resource to be purchased.

The idea that different social classes even exist in this country remains completely unacknowledged in these currently marketed series. The world view presented is comfortably middle and professional class. Capitalism and consumerism remain dominant themes. The American families pictured and discussed in the textbooks live in comfortable homes with big yards, attend attractive and well-equipped schools, are treated well by society, and appear to enjoy unrestricted access to financial and social success.

World history in the newest social studies series is chronologically rearranged so that Western civilization's accomplishments are glorified while Asian, African, and Native American historic contributions to world culture are minimized. The "Dawn of Civilization," for example, is elaborately presented through discussions and pictures of Biblical archaeology sites, while the highly complex and much earlier Indus and Shang civilizations are left out of the same discussion. European conquests are discussed very matter-of-factly, ignoring all ethical questions. Social or cultural critique is nonexistent, even when its absence is nothing less than puzzling — an example being a section on Martin Luther King, Jr., that portrays King as a defender of "freedom" but never discusses the oppression against which he fought.

The lack of critique in textbooks should not be regarded as a simple oversight. What it really amounts to is official pronouncement that the current system is fair and equitable. One wonders about the effect of these air-brushed textbook images on the many children whose lived realities are

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at such great variance with the curriculum handed to them.

Children from marginalized groups are often all too aware of these discrepancies. The more disconnected that textbook knowledge is from students' own lived reality, the more disconnected school feels in general. Adrienne Rich captures the distress of this kind of situation in a powerful quote: "When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing."[5]

A mandated curriculum, whether embodied in textbooks or in any other prescribed set of learning materials, can mire teachers down and make it difficult to respond to children's individual needs or concerns when they stray from the planned agenda. Recently one of the authors witnessed a first-grade teacher using an oversized social studies chart book in a lesson on the topic of schools and neighborhoods. As she rushed through the text-driven lesson, commenting on how they were behind and needed to get through this content and move on, a child of color volunteered that his mother used to work in the school cafeteria, but "she quit because somebody cussed her out. Somebody called her a [racial epithet]." The teacher quickly stepped on his words, saying, "I cut you off because we don't need to hear bad words like that in school . . . sometimes people hear things at home, and . . . [long pause] we need to get back to our book here, because we don't have a lot of time left today." It was excruciating to witness a situation in which the teacher let the demands of an impersonal curriculum take precedence over an opportunity to teach in very simple terms a much-needed lesson on "the Other," on people's feelings, and on people's basic rights.

Even standards that embrace multiculturalism can limit and control how multicultural education is defined and addressed. The more specific and detailed a set of standards is, the less room it affords teachers or teacher educators to bring their own thinking or children's own experiences to the task of teaching and learning. This is the important flip side of the earlier argument that standards can open up attention to pluralism.

Standards, Teacher Agency, and Pluralism

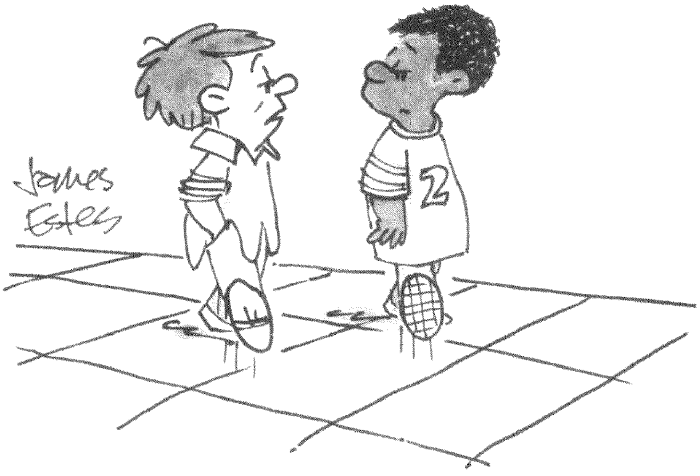
While standardization of curriculum can clearly blunt teacher decision making, the high degree of cultural homogeneity in the teaching profession does not ensure that increasing teacher decision making will improve education for all students. Pauline Lipman examined the way predominantly white faculties in two schools created school-reform efforts. White privilege was built right into the new system as surely as it had been in the old.[6] A predominantly white teaching force is likely to make most decisions through the lenses of white people's experiences and belief systems. This is not because the teachers don't care about the students, but because we all base our interpretations of the world on our life experiences.

Empowering teachers, then, is important, but an even more urgent goal is significantly pluralizing the teaching force. California State University, Monterey Bay, for example, has a very diverse faculty, in which no racial or ethnic group is in the majority. Issues make it to the table that would probably be ignored by a predominantly white faculty. Faculty members are also more committed to underserved students than is often the case, and there is a rich pool of intellectual and experiential resources for thinking through issues.

All teachers, though, need substantive multicultural teacher education. When a student who is of a different ethnic, racial, or socioeconomic background from the teacher tunes out from the lessons of the classroom, a teacher with a very limited perspective is likely to blame the child and his or her home life. That is why it is so critically important for teachers to be given ample opportunities to delve into multiculturalism.

Multicultural education is not a quick-fix inservice workshop topic. Teachers have been misled to believe that it is. Nor can teachers continue to maintain that their classrooms are already multicultural because the children are, the textbooks show it, and a few ethnic holidays are celebrated.

Teachers must be given time to examine their own multicultural knowledge base and to become aware of the way they read behavior through their own cultural filters. They also need to explore the intellectual work of groups of which they are not members, both for its implications for the curriculum and to be able to understand how people make sense of everyday



"They'll probably put those words on my tombstone: 'Okay, mister — to the office . . . now!'"

life. If one has little knowledge of American history as people of African origin have experienced it, for example, one will downplay the role of racism both historically and today. Without substantive exposure to the intellectual work of marginalized groups, teachers will have little upon which to reflect.

Another important area of investigation for teachers is racial identity development theory, which gives very helpful insights into how students (as well as teachers) process their own place within the racial order. Sleeter requires that her teacher education students spend time in the communities from which their students will come, so that they can develop good pedagogy that builds on community-based strengths, cultures, and resources. This is something teachers can do that will increase their effectiveness. Bohn's recent Midwestern study has similarly found that the teachers who possess more complex understandings of multicultural issues have all had some kind of significant, long-term experience with minority communities in their private lives. Yet this kind of teacher training is rarely required, and it isn't even discussed in most places.

Pluralizing the teaching force, giving teachers real opportunities to explore multicultural issues, and treating members of the teaching corps as professionals who can make informed decisions about teaching and curriculum are approaches that have far more potential to improve schools than searching for a "magic bullet" in the form of top-down standards.

A Time to Act

It is a given that teachers and school administrators want to do the right thing by students. Nevertheless, it is a very real possibility that the current obsession with standardizing curricula and measuring output will further reduce teacher agency and further marginalize segments of our society that are already seriously cheated by the system as it now operates. If we are to keep the critical issues in multicultural education from becoming obfuscated or even abandoned as the standards movement continues to gather steam, people who care must organize to exert pressure on state legislatures to attend to these issues. We must insist that the real way to improve schools is not, and never has been, a matter of finding a magic potion and then forcing it down people's throats.

When considering multicultural education, something must be understood: multicultural education is not a program. People frequently talk about it as if it were just one more program to add to a school — and perhaps even a passé program at that! It is not a formula. It is not and cannot be addressed sufficiently by any set of state or national standards, or by any textbook series, so that it will no longer require our sustained attention as educators. Multicultural education is a critical forum for reforming schools in ways that support pluralism and equity. Multicultural education is about dialogue across diverse groups and about learning to share power; it is a process of cross-group collaboration to reform schools so that they work for everyone.

In most successful interpersonal relationships, both parties have a say in how the relationship goes, and when there are problems, both parties have learned to listen to each other, to negotiate, and to collaborate on solutions. Unfortunately, this wisdom is noticeably absent from the most recent school reform rhetoric.

School reform for a multicultural society has to mean sharing power and collaboratively making decisions. Many of us fear that schools are moving in the opposite direction. Historically, organizing and pressing for change has been the most effective way of bringing it about. For multicultural education and its vision of real equity for all Americans to survive within the current standards movement, those who care are going to need to adopt that strategy now.

1. See, for example, Wayne P. Thomas and Virginia P. Collier, "Two Languages Are Better Than One," *Educational Leadership*, December 1997-January 1998, pp. 23-27.
2. Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children* (New York: New Press, 1995), p. 24.
3. Michael W. Apple, *Cultural Politics and Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996).
4. Christine E. Sleeter and Carl E. Grant, "Race, Class, Gender, and Disability in Current Textbooks," in Michael W. Apple and Linda K. Christian-Smith, eds., *The Politics of the Textbook* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 78-110.
5. Adrienne Rich, "Invisibility in Academe," in idem, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), p. 119.
6. Pauline Lipman, *Race, Class, and Power in School Restructuring* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).