

# **EDUCATION AND CULTURAL MINORITIES**

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It should go without saying that minority communities are not microcosms of the mainstream societies they inhabit. Differences in cultural values, in economic structures, in social organization, in political outlook, in epistemologies, and in many other aspects of day-to-day existence, combine to generally distinguish life in a minority community from life in the surrounding mainstream society. All of these differences must be taken into account in the development of appropriate services to address the educational needs of the respective populations. Policies, programs and structures designed to meet the needs of the population at large are not likely to be well suited to the needs of a cultural minority community.

In addition to all of the differences indicated above, however, there are also implications for the ways in which differences are situated, and from where they originate. Whereas large urban communities often reflect great diversity of socioeconomic composition within their boundaries, rural communities tend to be relatively homogenous internally, but can reflect considerable socioeconomic diversity from one community to the next. Immigrant minority groups, whose status as a “minority” usually derives from having moved and settled into a new majority society, will see their role in relationship to the majority culture from quite a different perspective than indigenous minorities, whose perspective is often shaped by a kind of colonial status in relation to the hegemonic society. The latter status often results in an oppositional posture that leads to the development of a set of secondary cultural traits oriented toward boundary maintenance and the protection of cultural identity from the hegemonic influences of the larger society. These secondary oppositional cultural traits, which can also be found in some immigrant minority groups, are much more difficult to delineate and address in educational practice than the primary cultural traits reflected in the original cultural systems of both indigenous and immigrant minorities.

The educational planning and policy-making implications of the rural/urban and immigrant/indigenous distinctions are greatly magnified by the differences that exist within and between minority communities themselves, many of which derive from various manifestations of differences in socioeconomic status. It is to these latter differences, which often lead to de facto classifications of social, ethnic, racial, cultural, and economic minority populations, that much of this article will be directed. The examples used to illustrate the points in the article will be drawn primarily from the U.S. setting, though in most cases parallels can be drawn to similar situations in both industrialized and developing countries.

The notion of "minority" can mean many things and is highly relative in its application. In some cases, minority groups are defined along ethnic or racial lines (e.g., Black, Hispanic, Native American, Meti), while in others they may be distinguished on the basis of religious orientation (e.g., Amish, Hutterite, Hassidic Jew, Muslim) or by position on the economic ladder (e.g., Appalachian poor white, migrant, gypsy). But whether or not a person is in fact a "minority" at any point in time depends on many other circumstances as well. In the context of an Indian reservation in the U.S., tribal members constitute a political and cultural majority and presumably, are in a position to shape their own policies and programs. In the larger state and national political arena, however, they are a minority and are subject to many constraints that are imposed from beyond their jurisdiction as a tribe. A group of migrant farm workers may originate from a home community in which they are the dominant political force when they are in residence. While on the road and in the fields, however, they are often in a subservient status and are subject to political and economic forces largely beyond their control. For the members of any group, it is this lack of political influence or sense of local control and self-determination that gives meaning to the notion of being a "minority". For the purposes of this discussion, therefore, cultural minority will be taken to refer to any group of people that holds a unique identity and position outside the social and political mainstream.

Given such a definition, one of the most critical variables that must be considered when examining the implications of public policy on a "minority" population is the power structure of the community. If the population in question constitutes a political majority in the community in which they reside, their ability to shape the policies and programs that impact their lives is much greater than if they are a minor element in the power structure. Determination of such a political status cannot be based on numbers alone, however, because many other historical, cultural and economic factors influence the level of participation in political affairs on the part of any group of people. Blacks in the South, for example, have only recently begun to exercise the level of political influence that their numbers would

warrant. Appalachian poor and migrants, like Blacks, have long been subject to economic exploitation by a small but powerful political system which has been able to keep the majority of the population in a politically marginal role. To overcome such exploitation, one of the first and most critical arenas that minority groups have sought to utilize on their own behalf has been education, for it is through education, formal and nonformal, that the political consciousness of a people can be activated and brought to bear on the policies and programs that impact their lives.

To the extent that the majority of the population of a community is composed of a relatively homogenous "minority" population (i.e. majority Black, Chippewa, Amish, Hispanic, etc.), there is going to be considerable diversity of need and perspective from one community to the next. Furthermore, the various rural minority populations in the US and Canada tend to be clustered by region, such that there is a preponderance of Blacks in the southeast, Hispanics in the southwest, and Native Americans in the west and plains areas, with Amish, Hutterites and Mennonites centered in the midwest and southern Canada. How a particular minority group or community positions itself and is perceived in the surrounding social, economic and political environment depends on many variables, ranging from past history to current economic opportunities and population composition. Any educational initiative from within or outside a community must take all of these variables into account, along with many less tangible considerations, such as differences in cultural values, lifestyle and world view, if it is to have any likelihood of succeeding. Policies for one minority group, community or region may or may not be appropriate for another.

### **Educational Issues Facing Cultural Minorities**

From the discussion thus far, it is apparent that the needs of cultural minorities present some unique challenges to the development of appropriate educational services in the communities in which they reside. While minority communities share some characteristics in common with one another (low socioeconomic status, political marginality, cultural differences, etc.), many of these characteristics require differential treatment in the educational context, along with the qualities identified previously that distinguish one minority community from the next. Some of the most critical variables that differentially impact the educational opportunities of cultural minorities are socioeconomic status, locus of control, level of community participation, and cultural appropriateness of instruction.

## Socioeconomic Status

The most influential factor that shapes the educational experience of minority communities is their socioeconomic status vis-a-vis the larger society in which they are situated. To the extent that a community has control over the social, political and economic forces that define its existence, it is able to shape the educational experience to reflect its needs and wishes. Thus, the Amish have gone so far as to take the state to court to protect their religious perogatives with regard to who teaches their children and how long they are required to attend school. They have established and maintained an independent social, religious and economic position from which they have been able to define their sustaining educational needs and establish appropriate mechanisms to meet those needs on a community-wide and continuing basis.

Other minority communities have not fared so well, however. Many Native American tribes, for example, have been historically subject to the oversight of the federal government, and until recently have had little direct control over the educational and economic policies that impacted their lives and communities. Lacking such control, Indian people have had little incentive to see formal education as being in their best interests, while at the same time they have managed to resist pressures for assimilation and have been able to maintain their own informal educational processes to protect and pass on many of their cultural beliefs and traditions from generation to generation. It was the federal Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act of 1976 that finally made it possible for Indian people to take control of the programs and services in their communities and reshape them to their own ends.

One of the biggest impediments to the development of an active minority community role in education has been the long history of economic exploitation. Whether it originated with oil drilling on the reservation, coal mining in Appalacia, sharecropping in the rural south, or migrant labor on the vegetable and fruit farms of the west, the legacy of exploitation continues to be reflected in the high levels of poverty and stifled aspirations imbedded in the homes and communities of the people who have been the victims. The steps necessary to overcome the sense of powerlessness that accompanies such exploitation often begin with education in one form or another. Rosa Parks sat in the front of the bus after participating in a civil rights workshop at the Highlander Center in Tennessee. Ceasar Chavez sought early on in his union organizing efforts to improve the educational opportunities for migrant farm workers. One of the first concerted political actions of the congressionally created Alaska Native Corporations was to obtain legislative action to dissolve the state-operated school system and create in its place 21 locally

controlled school districts. In each of these instances, education was the lifeline to a sense of community and a stimulus to political action on the part of the minority communities involved, but only because the initiative came from within the communities themselves.

From a socioeconomic standpoint, many minority communities are not unlike third world countries coming out from under colonial domination. They are seeking to assert themselves and carve out a future of their own making, reflecting the cultural values and traditions that give them distinction as a minority. For the educator, this means working with minority communities from a posture of facilitator and resource person, rather than in the all-too-prevalent role of outside authority or benevolent benefactor imposing its will on the community. For policy makers and community activists, it means shifting the emphasis from externally defined solutions to problems, to human resource development within the communities, and letting each community set its own course for development. Some of the conditions necessary for such steps to occur will be discussed later in this article.

### Locus of Control

The way educational services are organized can have a major impact on how responsive they are to the needs of diverse populations. One of the characteristics that distinguishes formal education from nonformal education is the locus of control and decision-making with regard to the content and processes involved. Formal education tends to be much more constraining in the degree to which local communities can exert influence over what occurs, particularly when subjected to national mandates such as those imposed by the No Child Left Behind Act. Schooling is subject to a wide array of externally imposed laws, rules, regulations, accreditation standards, certification requirements, curriculum guidelines, testing criteria, graduation requirements, etc., not to mention tradition, conventional wisdom, and institutional inertia. To bring schooling processes in line with minority community wishes, on even a relatively minor change in curriculum offerings or the school calendar, for example, can often require enormous amounts of time and energy to negotiate through the multiple layers of bureaucracy that protect the status quo of the formal educational system.

Nonformal education initiatives, on the other hand, have very little in the way of externally imposed constraints and thus can be readily shaped to meet the particular needs of a community. Adult literacy programs, cooperative extension service, health and nutrition workshops, 4-H clubs, leadership development initiatives, voter registration campaigns, etc., all illustrate the potential of locally

oriented and implemented community educational endeavors. For minority communities, such initiatives, unburdened by the structure of the formal educational system, provide the latitude to create educational opportunities that take into account the cultural inclinations and aspirations of the people being served. Nonformal education can thus provide a valuable complement to the services offered by the formal system.

Another factor that determines how susceptible educational services are to minority community concerns is the size of the community or institutions involved. In general, the larger an institution, the more rigid and bureaucratic it is likely to be, and the harder it will be to get it to make localized accommodations. On the surface, this would indicate that institutions in small rural communities would be more flexible and able to adapt to the special needs of the populations they serve. This is not always the case, however, because there has been a tendency for rural institutions to model themselves after their larger urban counterparts, and the persons working in these institutions often come out of training programs that are also oriented to large scale systems. This orientation to a large scale, "one best system" approach has been the basis for much of the pressure to consolidate small rural school districts into larger institutions, but consolidated school districts generally have distanced schooling from minority populations, rather than improve the opportunities available to them. It is for the same reason that many American Indian and Alaska Native tribes have taken over the operation of their schools from the federal and state-operated systems and established tribally oriented institutions. Small, locally run schools have a better chance of responding to the needs of a minority community than schools imbedded in a large bureaucracy.

### Level of Community Participation

Local control of an institution by a particular minority community does not in itself insure that the institution will be sensitive to the cultural beliefs and practices of that community. The high expectations of more than one community have been dampened when the operational version of their attempt at a more culturally appropriate educational program turned out to be little different from the program it was intended to replace. It would be easy to attribute such a lack of cultural adaptability in institutions to the fact that most professional level positions associated with educational programs are held by people from outside the minority community, and thus cultural innovations are constrained by the imposition of a Western/mainstream mono-cultural perspective. Such an interpretation, however,

neglects to take into account the fact that similar frustrations have also been experienced in situations where minority people have held professional roles and have made a deliberate attempt to respond to the wishes of the minority community. This would indicate that cultural biases reside not only in the individual occupying an institutional role, but in the very structure of the institution as well.

While people in professional roles, through their own deliberate action, can function as institutional gate-keepers, there are many other less obvious ways in which institutions can present unintended structural barriers to the accommodation of minority community concerns and perspectives. Such barriers may exist in any feature of an institution in which there is potential for different cultural beliefs and practices to influence the attitudes and behavior of institutional participants. This includes implicit behavioral routines, such as the way people are expected to communicate and interact with one another, and the way decision-making and leadership are exercised. It also includes explicit institutional routines, such as recruitment and hiring procedures, the way time and space are structured, and the criteria and techniques used to judge peoples' performances.

It is possible to reduce some of these institutional barriers by training non-minority personnel to recognize how institutional policies and practices favor some people over others, and encourage them to develop practices that take cultural diversity into account. Such an approach does not, however, address inequities in the distribution of power in the institution, nor is it the most effective or efficient means of building cultural sensitivity into institutional practices. Minority people, with appropriate training and the opportunity to bring their unique perspective and skills to bear, are generally in a better position to break down institutional barriers to minority participation, because they have inherent within them the necessary cultural predispositions. They must also, however, have the incentive and support to take culturally appropriate initiatives in the restructuring of institutional practices, or they will simply perpetuate the inequities built into existing practices.

Bringing professional responsibility for the delivery of educational services to the level of the minority community is a critical step if those services are to reflect local cultural considerations. In doing so, however, new kinds of demands are placed on the role of the professional, which require a familiarity with and sensitivity to features of the local cultural system that few people from outside the system are likely to develop. It becomes imperative, therefore, that minority people assume those roles and decision-making responsibilities, and be given the latitude to introduce their own *modus operandi* in response to the needs and conditions in the community. Efforts to achieve "cultural fit" may require changes

in institutional features ranging from the simple rescheduling of daily activities to a rethinking of the very function of the institution. Persons fully immersed in the cultural community being served are in the best position to recognize and act upon the discrepancies between institutional and cultural practices that interfere with the performance of the institution.

While moving the control of services closer to the community and bringing minority people into decision-making and professional roles is a critical and necessary step toward transforming educational programs and services into more culturally sensitive institutions, that step in itself is not sufficient to achieve the equity of services that is needed. In addition to possessing all of the bureaucratic and political skills necessary to maintain a Western institution, the minority community must also understand how the institution can be made to fit into the minority world without subverting essential features of that world. When such a transformation of existing institutions is not possible without losing more cultural ground than is gained, the minority community must also have the skill to build new kinds of institutions that can respect and sustain the biculturalism that is inherent in the contemporary minority experience. The innovative kinds of social, political and educational institutions that have grown out of minority community initiatives, such as the Highlander Education and Research Center in Appalachia, the Farm Workers Union in California, and the Native art cooperatives across Canada and Alaska, all reflect the strength and cultural spirit of the minority communities from which they emerged.

### Cultural Appropriateness of Instruction

One of the biggest challenges that schools serving minority populations face is bringing the educational experiences provided by the school in line with the social, cultural and economic aspirations of the community(s) being served. To the extent that the cultural fabric of the minority community being served is different from that out of which the school was constructed, some kind of accommodation is going to have to be made on someone's part if the two are to come together in a mutually productive manner. Most often it is the community and student that are called upon to make the adjustment, but increasingly, as minority people take on more influential roles in the schools, they are making an attempt to meet the students half way. These efforts have been particularly evident in minority communities where a second language is spoken and schools attempt to incorporate the local language in the curriculum as a language of instruction.



While it is not often easy, it is possible for a school to provide an integrated educational program that builds on the local cultural environment and indigenous knowledge base as a foundation for learning about the larger world beyond. Learning about one's own cultural heritage and community need not be viewed as supplanting opportunities to learn about others, but rather as providing an essential infrastructure through which all other learning is constructed. It is often a reality of today's existence that cultural minority students have a foot in more than one world, so their education needs to reflect the symbiotic and synergistic potential of that existence.

The school cannot do the job alone, however. The most critical factor in the success of any educational effort is its initiation from the cultural community being served and the strong, sustained and unequivocal support provided by representatives of that community. Without such commitment and persistence, innovative initiatives are likely to fall by the wayside within a few years. The parents and school board members must take an active interest in the education of their children, both in and out of school. The values and skills to be taught in school should mirror those encouraged in the home and the community. Education is a community responsibility, with the school serving as one player, albeit a key one, in the process. That which is expected of students in the school should be reinforced in explicit ways by the parents and the community, and that which is expected by the parents and community should be reinforced in the school. Parents should be active participants and contribute their indigenous knowledge and expertise to the school.

A cultural system is more than the surface or visible attributes of the language, arts and crafts, eating habits or subsistence practices of the people who sustain it. Being Hispanic, or Amish, or Athabaskan, or Black, also means a way of thinking, a way of seeing, a way of behaving, a way of doing things, and a way of relating to the world around you. Education must take all of these aspects of minority cultural existence into account if it is to be truly "multicultural".

### **Education for Cultural Diversity**

To the extent that factors such as socioeconomic status, locus of control, level of community participation, and cultural appropriateness of instruction require special attention in the design and provision of educational services for minority populations, it behooves us to find ways to formulate more sensitive policies and practices and construct more appropriate institutions, so that we can bring the necessary attention to bear on the issues that have been raised. The remainder of this article will be addressed to an examination of some of the

policies and practices that can enhance an institutions ability to accommodate cultural differences. Institutional characteristics and practices that can be particularly instrumental in facilitating responsiveness to cultural diversity are participatory decision-making, a decentralized authority structure, a distributive communication system, and a loosely coupled organizational framework. Each of these will be examined briefly, in the context of improving the ability of educational institutions to respond to diversity, in all of its manifestations.

### Participatory Decision-Making

As was indicated earlier, a minority perspective in decision-making can come about only through the presence of minority people in the decision-making arena. To be truly responsive to minority concerns, an institution must not only reflect an awareness of minority cultural values and practices, but it must also convey an attitude of respect for those values and practices. This must be done in such a way that minority people feel a sense of ownership with regard to the institution and see it as incorporating their traditions and perpetuating their interests. So long as the institutional decision-making processes are in the hands of non-minority decision-makers (regardless of how well-intentioned), minority people are going to feel shut out as equal participants in those institutions. But it is not enough to invite a token minority representative to "bring a minority perspective" to the decision-making arena, or to hire a token minority employee to integrate the staff and appease the critics. Nor is it enough to have minority people in professional or supervisory roles using conventional bureaucratic-style criteria to perpetuate western institutional values. Such gratuitous avenues of participation are too easily subverted by the weight of western bureaucratic machinery and do little to counteract the cultural distance between western-style institutions and minority people.

To develop a sense of institutional ownership, minority people must feel they are a part of the action and are a party to decision-making from top to bottom, beginning to end. They must be on the delivery end of institutional services, not just on the receiving end. If such a transformation is to take place, institutions must adopt a participatory approach to decision-making, whereby everyone that is affected by an institution, whether as producer or consumer of institutional services, has an opportunity to influence the way the institution operates. This requires multiple avenues of access to the decision-making process, so that everyone can contribute in a manner consistent with their relationship to the institution and with their style of participation and decision-making. It also involves a horizontal distribution of power, so that all of the decision-making

authority is not vested in a top-down hierarchical structure. Participatory decision-making is at the heart of any institutional or educational process which seeks to strengthen the degree of involvement of people in the institutions that impact their lives.

Increased minority participation in institutional decision-making can be achieved through a variety of mechanisms. These range from the establishment of affirmative action programs that strengthen minority presence in existing institutions, to the creation of new institutions, where minority people sustain their cultural community through their own system of educational institutions (e.g., tribal colleges). Other options include contracting with minority institutions to provide services to minority people; establishing minority councils to oversee minority interests; employing minority elders to advise in areas of cultural and spiritual significance; and creating minority units within existing institutions through which minority people can manage their own affairs. It is through mechanisms such as these, and any others that bring minorities into the decision-making arenas, that will provide them the opportunity to bring their voices to bear on the issues that shape their destiny as a people. It is not enough to be the beneficiaries of benevolent institutions. Minority people must be full and equal participants in the shaping and operation of those institutions.

### Decentralized Authority Structure

Participatory decision-making is empty rhetoric without a decentralized authority structure. In the context of building institutional respect for diversity, bigger is not better. If institutions are to be responsive to differences in cultural beliefs and practices, they must be scaled and situated in such a way that they are accessible and can interact with the client community on local terms. The larger the system and the more distant the decision-making is from the clientele, the greater the demand for conformity to institutional norms, and the more difficult it is to accommodate diversity. Conversely, the closer the system is to the people being served, the fewer the bureaucratic constraints and barriers that tend to interfere with peoples access to the system, and the greater the opportunity for diverse points of view to be heard and acted upon. The functional units of an institution must be small enough to allow for a personalized approach to services, so that local styles of communication and interaction can enter into the decision-making process, and so that services can be structured to fit the cultural norms of the client community.

One of the most common approaches to decentralization is to distribute authority over certain aspects of institutional services to regional or branch offices.

Such a move can be a significant step toward decentralization, but if the local authority is still tightly controlled by a distant central office, it may achieve no more than to add another layer to the institutional bureaucracy. If decentralization is to increase participation in decision-making, it must include the establishment of local bodies to whom local or regional authorities are answerable. Whenever possible, representatives of the client community should have a direct voice in policy-making and personnel and budgetary decisions. Client participation in the selection of key personnel is especially critical, so that local considerations can be taken into account, and so that the persons selected feel a sense of responsibility to the client community.

Another important consideration in institutional decentralization is the criteria for definition of a service area. Typically, decentralized service areas are structured along the lines of established political boundaries or geographical regions. Such criteria do not always coincide with traditional minority kinship and political structures, however, and as a result, tend to interfere with, rather than enhance minority participation in decision-making. Any attempt to establish a decentralized system that is to be sensitive to the needs of minority people must begin with a framework that minority people themselves use to organize their lives. For example, educational services may need to be provided through a regional or community-oriented delivery system, though "community" may not necessarily be defined geographically, since minority members are often dispersed across established political and geographic boundaries. Whatever approach is used, it should fit into the natural authority and decision-making structure of the community or region to be served. In those situations where institutional services are to be decentralized to better serve both minority and non-minority members, it may be necessary to establish a dual system with different criteria for service areas for each group.

Once again, it is important to recognize that the structure of an institution is a crucial factor in determining how effectively and equitably the institution can perform its functions. A decentralized structure, scaled to fit into the cultural and organizational framework of minority communities, will make an institution more accessible to minority participation, and thus increase its potential to serve minority needs.

### Distributive Communication System

A key ingredient for any kind of decentralized, participatory institutional structure to function properly is an effective communication system. If minority people are to be active participants in economic, educational, community or

institutional development, they must have ready access to information related to the development, and they must be able to convey their own views in culturally appropriate ways. This requires a system of communication that provides multiple and diverse avenues for people to participate in, and contribute to, the development process. Institutions that are intended to serve the educational needs of minority people must encourage a free flow of information into and out of the decision-making structure of the institution. This can be accomplished through formal and informal channels, including participatory committees, community meetings, Internet portals, newsletters and other regular publications, and various kinds of community consultancies. The important thing is that communication processes be distributed throughout the community so that everyone is well informed, and so that people can use their natural communication patterns to get their views across.

A large-scale, centralized, top-down communication structure is of little use in furthering local participation, whereas a distributive network that links people together with one another and with the institutions serving them, can greatly enhance the quantity and quality of participation. If institutions are to be responsive to minority interests, they must establish a communication system that taps into minority communication patterns and encourages two-way dialogue.

### Loosely Coupled Organization

Another characteristic necessary for institutional systems to be able to respond favorably to the cultural diversity reflected in minority communities is that the various components of the system be loosely coupled, so that the system can maintain a flexible, adaptive and open-ended posture in response to diverse demands. A rigidly structured centralized system will have considerable difficulty responding to the variations in social, cultural, economic, political, and historical circumstances that exist within and across minority communities. Along with decentralized administrative authority, it is important, therefore, that there also be sufficient latitude to adapt institutional structures to the particular circumstances in each minority service area. It is not necessary, for example, that each regional office of an educational agency adopt the same framework for the delivery of services. As long as there is general agreement on the functions to be performed and on the outcomes upon which effectiveness is to be judged, each unit should be encouraged to adapt its structure and services in response to local conditions, rather than be required to maintain a standardized bureaucratic framework. Different means can be used to achieve the same ends.

Demands for institutional uniformity arise from notions of cultural universality and bureaucratic efficiency. While such notions may be applicable to situations of cultural homogeneity, or in relation to functions of a strictly mechanical nature, they are not well-suited to situations or functions in which human behavior is a significant variable. In such situations, it is necessary to maintain a flexible and adaptive institutional framework that can respond to a varied and changing human environment. This requires personnel who are sensitive to cultural variations in behavior and possess a repertoire of skills for organizing diverse interests and efforts so that they fuse into a coherent collective endeavor. The administrator or policy-maker in such a situation functions less as a bureaucrat and more as a coordinator and mediator, leading by example and consensus rather than by decree.

### **Summary**

Culturally marginalized people around the world are seeking ways to bring educational institutions and services more in line with their particular interests and aspirations. The challenge of developing educational policies and practices capable of addressing minority concerns is being felt in both Third and Fourth World countries, with both indigenous and immigrant minorities. Changing demographics are forcing issues of "multicultural education" to the top of the domestic agenda in many industrial as well as developing countries. The issues raised in this article reflect just a few of the considerations that come into play when educational institutions attempt to address concerns associated with multiculturalism. Some of the issues raised apply to the education of the majority populations as well, but the distinctiveness of minority communities, one from another as well as from the hegemonic majority communities, calls for a distinctive response. To the extent that we can create more open and adaptive educational institutions and services to respond to the needs of minority communities, we will have improved the educational opportunities for all of us.