

BAILEY'S ELEMENTARY SCHOOL — CULTURAL PLURALISM IN THE 1990s

Bailey's Elementary School and its community is an example of how issues of cultural pluralism may be addressed at the local level in the coming decade. It is a community I know, as resident and PTA president.

Bailey's Elementary School is located in the Bailey's Crossroads area of Fairfax County, Virginia. It is a public school with about 530 students from 43 countries speaking some 22 different languages. About 40 percent of the children speak Spanish as their mother tongue. The other most often spoken native languages in the school are English, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Urdu, Arabic and Korean. Of the 70 native English speakers, about half are European American, half are African American. The staff, including teachers and administrators is also quite diverse. The cultural diversity of the students and their families is apparent in neighborhood grocery stores, churches and mosque, and flyers in store windows.

Cultural diversity is matched by economic diversity. Many parents are recent immigrants from rural areas of El Salvador, Nicaragua and Bolivia, living in relatively low rent apartments and working in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, as landscaping and construction laborers, housekeepers, child care providers, and servers at fast-food restaurants. More educated and professionally trained immigrants from Latin America are underemployed, as they support their families while seeking certification or language training that would enable them to exercise their occupational skills. Also in the apartments and nearby in smaller homes, live various other immigrants, mainly from south and southeast Asia. Some started as refugees, earned money in jobs and businesses and bought their own homes. Further away but within a half-mile from the lower rent apartments are luxury apartments, some the dwellings of foreign diplomats, and more expensive residential areas, some with homes in the \$200-300,000 range and others with homes worth more than \$1 million.

Teachers, students and indeed most parents are proud of the diverse nature of the school that is reflected in its books, lessons, field trips and cultural events. Some of the academic programs build upon and address the diversity of student backgrounds. As an example, the school initiated a Spanish language partial immersion program. In mixed classes of native English and native Spanish speakers, 40 first graders learn math, science and art in Spanish and language

arts, social studies, music and physical education in English. The English speakers help the Spanish speakers for half the day; they switch roles for the other half. This approach has facilitated language learning in both sets of children, consistent with a body of educational research indicating that such immersion programs result in increased abilities in both native and target languages for all students.

The program has spawned other positive side effects. For one, it helped hold more affluent native English speaking parents and their children in the school by offering a special high quality enhancement program. At the same time, it helped legitimate the knowledge that Spanish speaking students, new to the community, could contribute. Instead of being marginalized and told they were deficient, the Spanish speakers could exhibit leadership roles in class and help their English speaking classmates learn. Role reversal by both sets of students seems quite healthy. Additionally, Spanish speaking teenagers from nearby Stuart High School became involved in the Bailey's program. Some of these teenagers, coming into a high school in 11th or 12th grade from Latin America with little English speaking ability, were, understandably, alienated in their classes. Some were on the verge of dropping out. A timely arrangement between the Bailey's and Stuart Spanish language teachers brought the high schoolers into the classroom on a regular basis to help teach, tutor and mentor the first graders in the program. This has now proved to be a great success. The high school students feel they are making a valuable contribution. The first graders get more attention and help in their studies. Instead of encouraging marginalization and stigmatization of people on the basis of language and class, the program has used culture as a resource for everyone's education.

Yet, in this neighborhood, in one of the wealthiest counties in the nation, the school is seen as a threat, or a problem by a vocal and sizable minority of older homeowners. They decry the "decline" of the school, complaining about the "lack of White faces" and the wrongheadedness of the Spanish language partial immersion program. The community, they assert, is "decaying" as a result of the alien presence — this despite the fact that the apartments were built well before the suburban subdivisions. Long time residents complain about soccer games, the "loud (Latin) music" played in public, the lack of "neighbor-

liness" or "grounds keeping" exhibited by immigrant residents. Many of these people and others, including apartment dwellers, are also worried about alcoholism, crime, undocumented and unemployable immigrants, and other issues bearing on the quality of life. These are legitimate causes of concern, but the challenge is always to separate them from racism, fear and the spurious interpretation of facts. These feelings, based in prejudice, lead some people to see a threat to the American way of life, just because the kids at school are from working class families, have a different color of skin, or speak a different language.

It is interesting to note that in McLean, only a few miles from Bailey's, very affluent European American parents are on a waiting list to enroll their children in a Japanese language partial immersion program. Learning Japanese is not perceived as a threat to American education, but rather as a state-of-the-art program sure to give kids a competitive advantage in the world. The value of the Japanese language program vis-à-vis the Spanish program has nothing to do with the intrinsic grammars, poetics or linguistic attributes of the languages themselves. Instead, language and other cultural expressions may sometimes be valued, and devalued, rather transparently, according to the perceived social status of their bearers. With the support of the county, teachers and administrators at Bailey's are working to use cultural differences in a positive, equitable way to encourage the flowering of ideas and talents from each of its students for the benefit of all its students.

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periences characterize educational strategies which recognize cultural pluralism as both educational context and resource.

In the workplace, some industrial psychologists and sociologists have seen their task as the management and control of an increasingly diverse labor force. Some strategies entail minimizing expressions of diversity, while others more creatively encourage the development of new forms of occupational culture.

On national and international levels there are strong forces for cultural homogenization. If all consumers can be trained to have the same tastes, for example, product and market development become easier and more predictable. Diversity is more cumbersome and troublesome to large multinationals when a myriad of differences in taste, attribution of value, and motivational goals inform consumer choices. International marketers would prefer unanimity — today, generational, tomorrow, global — on what the "real thing" is and how to become identified with it.

On the public side, the United States has no Ministry of Culture, no coven of government bureaucrats to craft and promulgate the nation's culture. We do not have a national language, a national costume, a national dance, a national food. If we did have a singular national culture, what would it be? National cultural institutions have long played a role of encouraging the peoples of the United States to create their own cultural expressions in the context of larger frameworks of free speech and cultural democracy. The National Endowments do this through granting programs. The Smithsonian Institution has recently played a leading role in encouraging cultural pluralism, seeing it as a healthy extension of democratic and populist practices which ultimately strengthen the nation. The Smithsonian has made cultural pluralism in its audience, its exhibits, its research, its ideas and its staff a high priority for the 1990s.



Education in various types of settings conveys knowledge and aesthetics of diverse cultural traditions. At the 1989 Festival, Leodegario Reyno instructs children on the methods of coconut leaf weaving developed by Filipinos in Hawai'i. The Festival is an educational process different from the classroom and usual museum setting. It relies upon human interaction and stresses oral, manual and sensory means for transmitting insight. (Photo by Richard Strauss, Smithsonian Institution)

ISSUES IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

According to some interpreters of culture, the world is becoming more homogeneous. The spread of mass, popular commercial culture with a discrete set of television programs and formats, fast food, top music hits, designer jeans and other fashions, and a standard repertoire of consumer goods seems to have engulfed the planet. Modern technology — from television and radio to videocassette recorders, communications satellites, modems and fax machines — has seemingly reduced distances between the earth's peoples. We can send our voices and images around the planet in a matter of seconds.

Many cultures, as Alan Lomax (1977) has ably noted, are in moral and aesthetic danger as a result of this globalization of American mass culture, and as a result of the continued valorization of elite forms of culture.