

ASSIMILATION, NOT ACCOMMODATION

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The U.S. Dept. of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) is funding research on the relative effectiveness of bilingual and English-only education. This is part of a larger, ongoing project by the DOE's National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth to examine the impact of ethno-cultural accommodations on the academic achievement of students, especially those whose home language is not English.

One recent report, *Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners*, states clearly the extent to which our schools are failing these ethnic minority students: "Only 18.7% of English-language learners [in our schools] scored above the state-established norm for reading comprehension." Our schools, then, are turning out a staggering 81.3 percent of functionally illiterate language-minority students.

The massiveness of this disgrace is evident if one looks at the population involved. According to the Panel's report, "In 1979, there were 6 million language-minority students; by 1999, this number had more than doubled to 14 million." By now, it is larger still, by several million. Of this group, 12 million or more are proceeding through our schools without achieving even basic competence in the use of the English language.

This is the iceberg whose tip is the numbers of ethnic majority students, perhaps half, who also are functionally illiterate.

That our DOE needed (and still needs) to waste taxpayers' money to determine this is proof of how comatose our office holders and educational professionals are. If they awakened and examined how debilitating the prevailing educational theories are for all students, they would see that a revolution in our educational presuppositions is the sine qua non for reforming our schools. This revolution—far more than such peripheral concerns as funding, class size, or school choice—is the thing most needful.

At the heart of this debilitating mind-set is the notion that teaching must be adjusted to suit the home culture of students.

The paradox of this approach is that in practice, it means that we have created an educational system devoted primarily to teaching students what they already know. Readings are selected to "appeal" to their home origins. Since that is the prevailing methodology, we should not be surprised that students quickly come to assume that there is nothing new and worthwhile to be learned from reading.

This practice results in what is called "demographic determinism," namely the phenomenon that each of us is condemned to stay where we are, based on our socio-economic baggage. Some reading analysts have described this as the "Matthew effect," namely that "whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath" (Matt. 13:12).

This has led to a curriculum empty of prescribed content. Therefore, what we need is a new curriculum filled with those things that students do not know. In particular, we need to teach students those things that humans in our society should be expected to know.

As E.D. Hirsch—in his recent book *The Knowledge Deficit*—puts it (p. 45),

We don't need to teach [students] the things that writers directly explain; we need to teach them what writers take for granted and do not explain.... There is no way around the inherent structural necessity that comprehension entails acquiring the implicitly shared knowledge of the literate speech community. We must teach this shared knowledge to children if they are to become proficient readers.

This is precisely what our content-deficient, formalized curricula do not do.

In the case of ethnic minority children, our educators tell us that they must read authors—and have teachers—from their own ethnic community. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Rather they need the opposite, if they are to gain in the knowledge that will induce them to aspire beyond their narrow environmental horizon.

I shudder to think how impoverished my learning would have been if I—a young Jewish American—had not been beguiled in 5th grade by feats of prodigious detection on Baker Street or life on a raft floating on the Mississippi River, if I had not been awed in 6th grade by a whaler's monomaniacal pursuit of a malevolent white whale or a linguistically sophisticated ape foundling in Africa, if I had not been amazed in 7th grade by a million-year Martian picnic and dazzled in 8th grade by the voyages of Odysseus.

Cultural tailoring (pandering) does not work. As Mary Ann Zehr put it in her survey of the IES Literacy Panel's work that appeared in a recent issue of *Education Week*, "not one study showed that culture-based education improved achievement in reading and writing."

It does not matter whether a black student has a white teacher or a white student a black teacher. What matters is whether the teacher—black or white—is knowledgeable in his or her subject matter.

Most important, we should not be teaching students *their* culture, but we should be teaching them *our* culture.

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