



4-1-1976

### A Note of Education, Pluralism and Ideology

Ronald K. Goodenow

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/edconsiderations>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#).

---

#### Recommended Citation

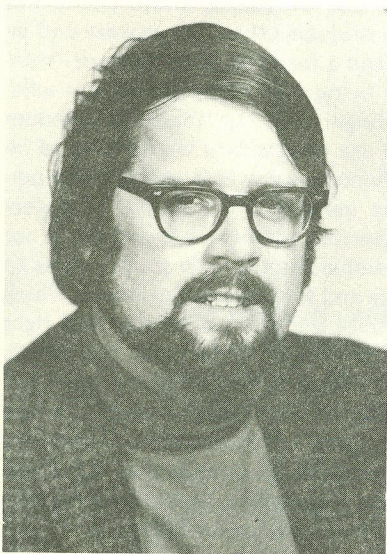
Goodenow, Ronald K. (1976) "A Note of Education, Pluralism and Ideology," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 3: No. 3. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2070>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Educational Considerations by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

Programs on ethnicity and pluralism may not only be self-serving, but like a great deal that passes for educational reform or change, designed to preserve institutional homeostasis and integrity.

## a note on education, pluralism and ideology

by Ronald K. Goodenow



Ronald K. Goodenow, assistant professor at the State University of New York, Buffalo, teaches philosophy of education with a special interest in ethnic groups, history, and progressive education. Goodenow has also taught at the University of San Diego, Bloomsburg State College in Pennsylvania, the University of California at Berkeley, and the University of Wyoming. He received his Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley; his master's from the University of Wyoming, and his bachelor's from Grinnell College.

America is discovering pluralism. Symbols of ethnic heritage appear everywhere, countless bicentennial projects on ethnicity are being proposed, scholars talk of a "new pluralism" that includes many of our heretofore "inarticulate" or repressed groups and the mass media is rushing into the breach with Polish policemen, Chicano car-repairmen and black junk dealers. It is no surprise, then, that educators who, in many cases, have just addressed "black pride" and the "new feminism" are responding with proposals and programs on various ethnic studies, "multicultural" education and even the broader rubric of pluralism. Scholars are appropriately responding with new literature, panels at scholarly meetings and courses. Forgetting for the moment that numerous educators have addressed pluralism for many years and that pluralism itself may be nothing new, there is a point that is seldom made on the extent to which our interest in social issues and the ways in which we develop policies and even theoretical positions represent what may be called a hidden ideological bias. I would like to address this problem briefly and suggest some partial remedies.

John Dewey warned in 1935 that

Even if the words remain the same they mean something very different when they are uttered by a minority struggling against repressive measures and when expressed by a group that, having attained power, then uses ideas that were once weapons of emancipation as instruments for keeping the power and wealth it has obtained. Ideas that at one time are means of producing social change assume another guise when they are used as a means of preventing further social change.

While it would be tempting to assert that many of us will use the rhetoric and needs of the new ethnicity and pluralism for strictly careerist purposes—ethnicity and careerism being ascendant phenomena these days—what is important is that we understand that far more than personal aggrandizement is involved.

As numerous scholars have pointed out, the "nature" of race, ethnicity, assimilation, acculturation and pluralism has constituted a problem in the sociology of knowledge. We frequently develop theories and ideas that may or may not be well-grounded in social reality, but they are most certainly influenced by our normative professional concerns and probably by the extent to which many of us recognize our marginal positions in American society and search for professional recognition, public approval or power. Hence, scholarly

inquiry about pluralism and related matters as well as ensuing prescriptions for "problems" associated with it have at times been far from objective or even, as scientific propositions, properly descriptive or testable. Transcending "mere" personal bias, moreover, programs on ethnicity and pluralism may not only be self-serving, but like a great deal that passes for educational reform or change, designed to preserve institutional homeostasis and integrity.

Much, then, of what we may say and do about pluralism inevitably touches on what many of us believe about our place in America, about the functions of education and about what ethnics and others are saying. These beliefs, it is important to say, often transcend the merely ideational and verge on the ideological. On this point I would like to quote William Newman, who writes in **American Pluralism: A Study of Minority Groups and Social Theory**, that

... ideological formulations, whether they be unconscious expressions of group interests, or as Marx contended, conscious lies about the nature of reality, are recognizable because of the congruence between ideas and the social groups, structures, or societies in which they emerge. *Ideologies may be defined as any set of ideas that explain or legitimate social arrangements, structures of power, or ways of life in terms of the goods, interests, or social position of the groups or social collectivities in which they appear.* (Emphasis added.)

In light of this observation it is important to note a paradox of the time in which we live. Modern educators have often desired to build a technological society held together by the "glue" of educated democratic attitudes and values. This society, moreover, has been characterized by place to place mobility, suburbanization, the growth of the corporate welfare state and increasing uses of planning and expertise. Yet, we have also faced increasing demands in the past few years that our visions of this Great Society give way to respect and power for smaller and more autonomous groups and wholly new concepts of legitimacy and national community. We often recognize this dilemma, but in seeking what Richard Hofstadter called "comity," a middle ground between consensus and conflict, we occupy something of an uncomfortable position between hell and a very hard place. It is difficult to give up our dearly held and "progressive" notions on the purposes of education just as it is hard to resist popular demands, for after all, American education and democracy have seemingly been built on popular consensus in an increasingly educated society.

Proponents of pluralism correctly argue that elites, including such educators as Ellwood Cubberley, have historically used ideologies on progress to build a false national consensus and conformity on what it is to be a "true American." It is suggested that this has been done to serve purposes of social selection and control in a capitalist society. If this contention is at times exaggerated it is the case that even some of the most progressive reformist educators who have espoused pluralism have over-stressed its cultural aspects (in large part out of their belief in the power of art and creativity to create tolerance and understanding) and ignored its sociological aspects. At the same time many have feared political self-expression by the uneducated poor and the immigrant. Indeed, I think we must recognize that many of us have seen education as a

replacement for politics, and it is here that we must focus some attention. If we believe that a new pluralism is rooted in the desire to overcome elitist social control and the forms of assimilation and theories which rationalize it, we may be a major part of the problem that it addresses. Hence, it is not just in the area of meanings but with an ideology grounded in our own occupational roles and status that we must begin our approach to the new pluralism. Going back to Dewey, we must recognize that when we, as university professors or school teachers or administrators, utter words, which to others are symbols of emancipation, we utter them from what to the poor, the black, the woman or the ethnic is a position of immense power which has been used to create a false consensus on their place in American life. What do we do?

We must, of course, use our analytical skills and training in the social sciences to come to some conclusions on whether there is a new pluralism, ethnic or otherwise. We must relate this phenomenon not only to our past, but to American social structure, our economic modes of production, our political system and the popular consciousness and behaviors which are derived from them. Examination of the black experience in America, for example, would be most helpful and relevant to our work. For generations blacks have argued the relative merits of self-separation and integration, structural and cultural. They have fought relentlessly with the realities of power and powerlessness. As Thomas Sowell brilliantly argues in **Black Education: Myths and Tragedies**, white academics have created ethnic studies programs that are separate and inferior out of guilt, naivete and a fear that somehow our "standards" and "prestige" are being eroded by barbarians who, once within our gates, infringe upon our academic freedom and prerogatives. We must use what power we do have to insure that pluralism, as a phenomenon which provides for personal freedom, close group identity and a means of decentralizing our increasingly centralized corporate society, is not exploited within the educational system or in society so as to divert us from social change and the immense problems which plague America. One can cite the anti-communist and right wing politics of some of the early backers of the Ethnic Heritage Studies Act and the ways in which Spiro Agnew and Richard Nixon used ethnicity for purposes of maintaining law and order in the face of bankrupt federal policies. Indeed, we must ask if the new ethnicity which was discovered in the late 1960s still endures in the face of economic breakdown, Nixon's humiliating demise and the rise of old liberal coalitions.

Basically, however, we must look at the extent to which members of ethnic groups and the working classes are saying something very important about the ways in which they, and perhaps all Americans, are alienated from work and each other in a capitalist technocratic society. To what degree is the new pluralism the result of such alienation? I think that if we address this question, we will find a way out of our paradoxical dilemma. C. Wright Mills observed in **The Sociological Imagination** that Americans have been educated to define their lives and, more importantly, their troubles, in highly personal terms. We not only suffer illusions from what is now being called contest mobility, but from a false consciousness on the relationship between troubles that are properly personal and those that are caused directly by the particular nature of our social structure and how it relates to culture.

If we take this analysis seriously we may overcome some of the ideological constraints I have mentioned. We may teach and deeply affect the lives of our students while maintaining a commitment to scholarship and, indeed, social change. By showing our students the intersection between personal biography and the social system and placing this knowledge within the context of history we will encourage personal liberation and scholarly inquiry about the real world. As a problem in the sociology of knowledge our perception of

pluralism provides, then, an opportunity to examine who we are and what we do as educators, for we must study our own personal history and our relationship to American social structure and history. By so doing we may overcome much of our own feeling of powerlessness by truly changing lives and providing the scholarly inquiry and, in Mills' terms, the sociological imagination upon which political action may be defined and built. To do otherwise, I contend, means that we "educate" at our own peril.

### **education and the will of society**

No rational assessment of American education is possible without an understanding of the close link between the nation's mood and the schools. The optimism of the frontier, the fear of foreign (un-American) dogma, the dream of an open society, the conviction that there are pragmatic solutions for all problems, the trust in efficiency and productivity, the faith in the triumph of the new over the old—all of these often conflicting currents of thought have shaped American schools. They did so not because educators recommended it but because society willed it.

**Growing Up In America** by Fred. M. and Grace Hechinger. McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1975, page 411.