

Notes

Session V - National Education Organizations' Views on Multicultural Education

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Thank you very much for this opportunity to present our views. About twenty-five years ago the AFT received inquiries from a number of leaders of our locals across the country to look into the question of the representation of African Americans in our textbooks, and we employed somebody at that time and issued a study twenty-five years ago indicating that African American were virtually absent from our textbooks and that where something did appear it was usually very inaccurate. After twenty-five years past we asked Paul Canyon to look through two sets of textbooks one was world history, textbooks in terms of analyzing them to see how well the story of the unfolding of the development of democracy is told, and then US textbooks and even after all these years have past and ours, of course, was not the only report to come out during the 1960s at the height of the Civil Rights revolution, still Canyon reported that an awful lot needed to be done, that sure there were some side bars and some pictures but there was not really a well told story. So coming to this issue I would like to say several things.

First, history differs from chronology, chronology of course is just a listing of dates and that is quite different from history. And history does tell a story. It is a selection, and that's why history is rewritten. It tells it from a certain

perspective. We have a very strong commitment to the notion that students growing up in our society ought learn about the development of democracy. And one reason for the inclusion of many different peoples and many different cultures is basically that is the history of our country truly told. It cannot be told except, through the story of not only the contribution but also the sad side, the tragic side of American history - the history of slavery and racism but also the history of the efforts to abolish slavery and overcome racism and the effects of racism. This story is a, I think particularly apt point of view from which to rewrite history today. Because people around the world today are going to be concerned with the same question mainly how is it possible for different ethnic groups to live together in the various republics in the Soviet Union or in Eastern Europe. If you look at the problems of the Middle East there is a basic problem there about how different peoples can live together. South Africa, the problem having essentially one society with many different peoples recognizing an underlying unity of having a single nation but recognizing that it is not a melting pot. People just don't become one undifferentiated mass. That story with its complexity, it seems a really apt one not just for the United States but for the entire world today.

Also in dealing even with the history of Europe or the West if you take something like Thursday, July 14, 1992 and have students look at that. Say, where did the Thursday come from? Oh, the Norse

gods. And where did July come from, it came from Rome. And where did the Arabic numbers 14 come from, and where did 1992 come from? In terms of Christianity, Arabic numbers, I mean, you can't take something as simple as any date in our calendar without emphasizing the borrowings and all the differences in something as simple as that.

Now, having said that I would also say that we are very concerned that multiculturalism has become a word which has under it very many different notions. While we very strongly support the notion of moving to an accurate and true history of the United States and away from the single flag, waving patriotic very simplistic notion I know I got when I went to elementary school and that many others got. We should not replace one form of mythology with another form of mythology. And so I think there are some tendencies toward that. There are tendencies to say "Well, we have been excluded up to now and they've had all their myths so let's each group have its own myths and tell its own tales. That would be very unfortunate because a history accurately told will certainly show that great the contributions of each group that makes up our country, and by the way it will show each group has sinned against others. No group has been totally virtuous.

We also need to be concerned with ideological histories, which treat the United States, if previous histories treated us without any sins at all, some of the current ones that coming up treat the

United States as nothing but a history of oppression and exploitation. And I think if we exchange, again, one set of myths for another set of myths for another set of myths we will be making a terrible mistake. There has certainly been oppression in our society but there certainly has been successful struggles to get rid of that oppression and we should not ignore that.

I also think it would be a mistake as some of the proposals have it which is to get away from teaching history (which I think is important for an understanding of our past and I think you need to know that things happen in a certain order and that there are causes and effects and consequences) and to exchange that for a bunch of in depth studies which ignore the timeline. I think we need both and as Diane Ravitch has been arguing in many places we need more time because you can't do justice to the timeline and also spend a good deal of time going in depth on a number of these issues we have been talking about.

Finally, while emphasizing the great diversity that has existed in our past and continues to exist today, that should not be at the expense of emphasizing the unity that exists also. We should remember that the American public pays for public schools. It pays to invest in future citizens and I believe not just because their economic role but because of their citizenship role as future citizens. And while celebrating and understanding diversity is extremely important, I don't think the American people will feel

obligated to support a public school system that emphasizes diversity and conflict only and doesn't emphasize the underlying unity that exists.