



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1996 Volume I: Multiculturalism and the Law

Introduction

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The United States is the most ethnically, racially and religiously diverse country in the world. One of the persistent themes of our history has been tension between the conception of this country as a unified “melting pot” (our national motto, after all, is “e pluribus unum” from many, one) and as an assemblage of culturally distinctive groups which do not submerge their distinctiveness in a separate national identity. Each of these conceptions has had both desirable and undesirable meanings in our history. The “melting pot” conception was an ideal that guided many immigrant groups in their quest to become fully accepted members of their newly adopted home; but this same conception was an instrument of coercion and injury when it was directed against groups, such as Black slaves or Native Americans, whose distinctive cultures were overrun by nationalist-imperialist forces. Similarly, the conception of persistent cultural distinctiveness was an ideal when it was invoked by groups as an expression of self-respect and mutual respect for others’ differences; but this same conception was an instrument of coercion and injury when some groups drew racial or religious lines to depict relationships of superiority/inferiority (as in white supremacist oppressions or religious discriminations by majority against minority groups). American law has played an important role in the expression of these cultural tensions sometimes working on behalf of the positive valence in these ideals and sometimes in support of their coercive, negative valence.

The purpose of this seminar was to explore these different meanings of multi-culturalism and the different roles that American law has played in their expression. All of the seminar participants were especially aware of the distinctive ways that this persistent cultural tension are currently expressed in the New Haven community generally and within the New Haven public school system specifically. Questions of race, ethnicity and related language differences are especially salient in our community and public schools today. Much of our seminar discussion and most of the curriculum units designed by the Fellows focussed on these questions.

There are special challenges in discussing these questions because they are not remote abstractions but directly affect our lives and our some of our deepest roots of personal and cultural identity; and these questions, moreover, are the subjects of intense conflict in many parts of our communal life. In designing curriculum units for public school classroom use, each of the Fellows was aware of the need to respond to these challenges by presenting curricular materials that would promote mutually respectful exploration but, at the same time, would not ignore the deep-seated sources of conflict inherent in these issues or gloss over unpleasant truths about the persistence of racial, ethnic and other kinds of discrimination and oppression in our contemporary society.

The success of the curriculum units in meeting these challenges was considerably assisted by the character of

the discussion we were able to sustain among the participants in this seminar. We were not a statistically representative microcosm of American society: for examples, of the sixteen participants, twelve were African-Americans, twelve were women and all but one were Christians of various denominations. Thus we had majority and minority groups among us that diverged from some of the statistical norms in the society but nonetheless reflected our cultural differences in other ways. In our discussions, as the seminar proceeded, we drew on the different sources of our own personal and cultural identities in an enriching spirit of openness and mutual respect.

By the end of the seminar, our own experience had become strong evidence for the fruitful possibilities of exploring cultural conflicts which in the world outside our seminar room can hardly be honestly discussed much less respectfully resolved. We came away from this experience hopeful that our frank and trusting explorations could be reproduced in our classrooms, in other classrooms, and even beyond and that the curriculum units developed through this seminar would help in this mutually liberating process.

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