

Why Children need a Cultural Tradition

Is the National Curriculum a curriculum for the Nation?

Everywhere you look nowadays there's a National Centre for this and yet another National Centre for that. It seems that now, more than ever we are searching for the meaning of this word 'National'. Nowhere does it seem more aggressively promoted than in the National Curriculum.

There are constant calls for 'cross curricular' and 'multi-cultural' perspectives in schools. The astonishing thing about these calls is often the ignorance on which they are founded. It is automatically assumed that the white Anglo-Saxon English have their own culture and that special means are required to promote the cultures of Ethnic minorities. Look again.... the Ethnic minority is identifiable as such, not by colour but by culture. The 'Ethnic' bit of the phrase relates to culture and tradition and the fact that any group is identifiable as 'ethnic' is due to their possessing an active, living and discernable culture. It is the ABSENCE of any truly identifiable culture among the 'white-Anglo-Saxon' sector of our society which makes other groups stand out. Put simply, the ignorance of the majority to the riches of their own culture is largely responsible for the need to integrate ethnic minorities.

Lets put the boot on the other foot. Traditional music, dance, song and storytelling are alive and well in all sectors of society except that to which the majority of the population belong.

The average teacher in this country, if he or she comes from the majority group, is simply not equipped by culture or training to cope with the needs of the minorities in this context. This is because he/she is singularly lacking the cultural background needed to draw together so called, 'multi-cultural' links with the cultures of other ethnic groups in the classroom. This is an area which must be addressed. Let me supply some examples.

I have a very good young friend whose family origins are in the Caribbean. One day I was staying at his flat in London and I happened to be reading Stan Hugill's 'Shanties and Sailor Songs'. My friend suddenly shot to his feet and pointed at one of the illustrations

"What's that?" he asked excitedly. I replied that it was a drawing of fishermen in Barbados moving a hut up the beach.

"My Granddad used to do that!" came the excited reply. There then followed a long debate about Sea Shanties. As Hugill himself admits, most of his great collection was obtained from black singers. Essentially the Shanty tradition is a Black tradition; almost a great lost Black Music. Here we have something of another culture and, if we really want to know what they sounded like then we should encourage this particular cross cultural link and develop it as such in our schools.

On another occasion a group of black friends came to stay for a week of dance classes. After a slightly uncomfortable start to the evening a videotape was brought out showing the recent works of the dance company to which the visitors belonged. After a couple of minutes I stared transfixed at the screen, "What's that?" I asked, the reply came,

"That's John Canoe, a character from the Jamaican carnival."

I grinned, the creature on the screen was virtually identical with the Minehead Hobby Horse.

It wasn't long before we were comparing notes on culture and identity, I learned about John Canoe, Pitchy-Patchy and the hazards of too many star fruit and my

friends learned about, Padstow, the Border Morris and of course Minehead. The whole week that followed was memorable for its warmth and sense of unity. There were eight of us living in a small house, we spent the week celebrating both our differences and our common humanity.

Look at the music of the Eighteenth Century, not the famous stuff, I mean the dance tunes, the culture of the Assemblies and the drawing room. Note that the French, enamoured of the English Contra-Danse, created a form called the Cotillion. By the 19th Century the English had in turn modified this into the Quadrille. The Americans into the Square Dance and it's now pretty much the national dance of Jamaica. Someone told me, 'There's nothing more English than a Polka!'

The National Curriculum recommends traditional dance is taught within the PE lesson. The Quadrille and its family are much too big for such a small area of study. This is cross-curricular, multi-cultural experience in abundance! There are two types of musical instruments available in schools, those that are 'approved' as being useful educational tools, glockenspiels, electronic keyboards and god-forbid, untuned percussion. The other kind of instruments are those you can actually identify with and which give instant and satisfying results -these include, the guitar, the fiddle, whistle and of course the concertina and melodeon. Do you realise that most people have never seen a concertina? These are real instruments and play real music - the results are not some technological sound bite.

We are rich in stories too which delight and captivate children of all ages. Did you know that the story of the girl mistaken for a swan is common to nearly every culture on the planet? Whether in the form of the Swan Lake ballet, the Japanese Noh drama, the aboriginal dreamtime story or in the ballad 'Polly Vaughan'. Did you know that in Sheffield the same tales are told of our Six Blind fiddlers as are told in Japan of ancient Zen monks? Now that is multi-cultural.

I really do believe that, if the seed of tolerance is to grow amongst the young then the soil must be tilled and fertilised.

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