

“No Pot of Gold at the End of the Rainbow”

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The unfortunate political entanglement that has ensnared education, particularly curriculum, reached its zenith in New York City in the 1990s when a local school board turned a diverse and thoughtfully developed curriculum into a narrow discussion of homosexuality. The story is worth recounting because it illustrates the powerful role of politics in forging the curriculum.

The task was straightforward -- develop a curriculum more reflective of the polyglot of citizens populating New York City in order to promote tolerance and respect for this diversity. The immediate result was an enormous volume of background information, activities, caveats for teachers and bibliographic materials. The long term results, however, were much more dramatic, ultimately contributing to the ouster of the Chancellor of the New York City Public Schools and, rather than promoting tolerance, instead abetting intolerance. It is a tale that illustrates the potential volatility of curriculum, how easily it can become politicized, and how multiculturalism may become marginalized in its goals and products.

This chapter focuses on the most recent of the historical cases highlighted in this volume. It may, indeed, be too soon, historically, to reflect accurately on this case, but it did seem to the authors that such reflection would be a valuable bridge between the earlier tenets and practices of multiculturalism and the ostensibly more refined parameters that define multiculturalism in the beginning of the twenty-first century. This case also has inextricable ties to and with the media, mostly the local print media, but when the local area is New York City, it is difficult to prevent coverage and concerns from becoming more national. With the ready availability of local media on the Internet, it may be that the curricular “model” described in this chapter will become a kind of template for local curricular issues in the future becoming, unavoidably, national issues.

The Curriculum

Development

In 1989, the Board of Education of the City of New York passed a resolution urging the schools to promote a greater appreciation of diversity by race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation. The Board’s resolution recognized the increasing immigration to the United States and, most specifically, to and through New York City. In the 1970s and 1980s a new immigration trend had emerged in marked contrast to that of the early years of the century. Whereas, before immigration had been more than 80% European, new immigration was more than 80% non-European. Though many immigrants continued to use New York merely as a port of entry, thousands settled in the city and their presence would have a marked effect on the schools and school programs.

In the census period between 1970 and 1980, New York City increased its percentage of Hispanic residents to over 21% with about 1.5 million people. The percentage of Blacks was over 25%, more than 1.8 million people. In addition, there were over 1/4

million Asian/Pacific Islanders and nearly fifteen thousand Native American Indians, Eskimos, and Aleuts. (Bureau of the Census, 1983).

Along with cultural diversity, came language diversity that has always been the hallmark of New York City. Of persons 5 to 17, that is, school age youngsters, 471,000 spoke a language other than English at home and nearly 60,000 of those spoke no English at all or very poorly. Most of these second-language or non-English speakers spoke Spanish, but the number of Italian speakers was still quite high and the number of Chinese speakers was the third highest of those languages identified. It was this that led to the establishment of New Comers High School in 1995. This high school offers courses in a number of languages, including Bengali, Chinese, Korean, Polish, Romanian, and Spanish (Belluck, 1995).

The task of developing a curriculum to implement the Board of Education’s resolution fell to the Chancellor’s staff. The Chancellor, Joseph A. Fernandez, was a native of New York City who had spent most of his professional career in the Miami-Dade County (FL) Public Schools where he rose from teacher to superintendent, a position he had held since 1987. He was appointed Chancellor of the New York City Schools in 1989 following the sudden death of Richard Green from asthma. Fernandez was a former math teacher, but despite prior expertise in curriculum, he had delegated responsibility in that area since taking on larger administrative roles. Indeed he had made his greatest impact by advocating and practicing School Based Management (SBM) in Dade County and this was a great selling point to the Board of Education in New York City when they hired Mr. Fernandez.

In her brief forward to the new curriculum which was produced by the Chancellor’s staff entitled *Children of the Rainbow*, Nilda Soto Ruiz, the Chief Executive for Instruction of the New York City Public Schools, reiterated some of the statistical realities noted earlier in order to contextualize the social and curricular climate in which the *Children of the Rainbow* was created.

It must be noted that over one hundred languages are spoken in the New York City Public Schools, and that almost half of the sixty thousand children attending kindergarten come from homes where a language other than English is spoken. As the research strongly supports the idea that children learn best when the home language is incorporated into the school environment, it is important that all kindergarten classrooms, not just ESL and bilingual programs, reflect home cultures in their instructional strategies. When children value their own individuality and cultural identity, they learn to appreciate and respect others as well.

(New York City Public Schools, 1990, iii).

These were important words which essentially framed the task as well as the strategy of the curriculum and curriculum makers. They were reflective of social development and social reconstructionist goals of schooling and the curriculum. Though content was hardly eschewed, it was to be taught within the parameters that framed the social process.

The notion was that the *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum would be developed in an accretive manner, beginning with kindergarten and expanding by at least a new grade level each year.

In 1990, the first volume – *Implementing a Multicultural Kindergarten Curriculum* appeared. In more than 350 pages, the guide presented fifteen sections of strategies, activities, and materials for the city's kindergarten classes. More than twenty-five district personnel were identified as principal writers of the guide. Of those, five were specifically identified as being from a bilingual or second language office in the district. Fifteen persons were identified with early childhood duties or specific transitional home-to-kindergarten programs in New York City. The rest were representatives of Special Education, general staff development, or school improvement. Nearly twenty-five other individuals within and outside the district were identified as reviewers from "the educational community." Half of the reviewers were external including three from outside the State of New York.

Content of the Guide

The *Children of the Rainbow* guide for kindergarten is described as "a comprehensive guide to implementing a developmentally appropriate, multicultural kindergarten program" (New York City Public Schools, 1990). Almost every section contained background information for the teacher, teaching strategies, suggestions for home/school partnership, and teaching activities. The first section, the introduction, outlined the program and its philosophy,

By acknowledging, respecting, and celebrating diversity, the teacher recognizes the whole child and can plan experiences, which extend multicultural awareness. By understanding the similarities and differences of cultural groups, children learn that all people have the same basic needs, though they may respond to them in different ways. Parents and community members are vital components in the process.

(New York City Public Schools, 3)

After discussing the development of the five-year-old child, the guide offered a number of reflective questions for teachers to ask themselves about multiculturalism, followed by a listing of the over one hundred languages spoken by children in the New York City public schools.

The second section, "First Days" provided strategies for beginning the new school year, and section III, "Parent Involvement", "describes the vital home/school partnership, while offering suggestions for ongoing parental participation in the learning process" (vii).

Section IV, "Bilingual Education/English as a Second Language" and Section V, "Creating a Learning Environment", focused on background information on language proficiency,

acquisition and relationship to culture while providing techniques for using materials effectively.

The next two sections deal with strategies for curricular enrichment and specific musical and literary materials for multicultural enhancement. Sections VIII, IX, and X focused on the teacher, guidelines for theme planning and development, a discussion of language emphasis for the limited English proficiency (LEP) child and, finally, the role of other caring adults in the educational lives of young children. This latter part also included a guide for administrators.

The next section, "Looking at Today's Children", was the most reflective of what appears to be a social reconstruction curriculum philosophy. After a discussion of the value and characteristics of play, the remainder of the section addressed societal concerns -- preventing child abuse; alcohol, drug, and substance abuse; homeless/shelter children. The focus on child abuse was in direct response to the rising number of reported cases of such abuse in New York City and nationally. Indicators of child abuse were offered for teachers to be alerted. Strategies for talking with possibly abused children *privately* were offered. Lesson ideas for individuals or small groups regarding protective behaviors were offered. Presentation ideas for working with parents informally were given as well as a final reference to the Chancellor's Memorandum No. 20, 1987-88 on the commitment of all schools to safety, health, and welfare of the child.

The alcohol, drug, and substance abuse section was fairly standard -- healthy foods, dangerous household substances, "common" illegal drugs. The danger of these was continually emphasized. The final part on homeless/shelter children was presented because "Families with young children are the fastest growing segment of homeless Americans" (267). These two pages are informational to assist the teacher. There are no activities or teaching ideas.

The final sections contained teacher information and bibliographic resources. Assessment, educational theory and research on multiculturalism and developmental skills in the curricular areas comprised these last sections.

All in all, the Kindergarten Guide for *Children of the Rainbow* was well received and hardly controversial. The "societal concerns" section was well contextualized and strongly justified by the rising numbers of abused children, those exposed to dangerous substances, and the increase in the homeless. Though these topics were uncomfortable, there was a sad resignation of their reality and their examination implied no acceptance of these as appropriate societal conditions. Possibly buoyed by this, the Chancellor's staff writing the first grade guide may have felt that the public understood this difficult task that had been undertaken and was willing to accept more controversial issues as appropriate for curricular study. That would not be the case, however, when the *Grade One Guide* was presented in 1991-92.

Grade 1 Guide

The generally positive response to the Kindergarten Curriculum of *Children of the Rainbow* may have emboldened the Chancellor's staff that met to write the First Grade Guide. A number of changes were implemented in the production of this latter guide. The first difference is that the First Grade Guide is both

smaller and larger. There are about forty more pages in total, but the actual content is divided into two parts. Both of these might not be used by the same teacher, since they are in two languages (English/Spanish), meaning a teacher would have to be bilingual to utilize both parts. The parts are not simply the same content translated into the other language. There were large sections that overlapped, but the Spanish section was almost exclusively limited to the content enunciated in the “Chancellor’s Learning Objectives” for grade one presented in pages xiii-xxviii. The objectives are performance-based and divided into the content areas of Communication Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies.

Much of the guide’s content is replicative of the Kindergarten Guide and is acknowledged as such. There are fewer credited writers of the first grade guide, five being credited for the Spanish section and fourteen for the English section, compared to twenty-seven for the Kindergarten Guide. Five authors appear on both guides’ list of writers. Six of the reviewers for the Kindergarten Guide were credited as reviewers for the First Grade Guide. Thus, the First Grade Guide reflects both continuity and “freshness” in the choices of authors and reviewers.

As noted earlier, the Spanish focus was almost exclusively on content, while the English language materials had two areas, “Societal Concerns” and “Assessment” which had a broader perspective. Controversy would focus within “Societal Concerns”, Section 5.

In the Introduction, the Program Philosophy presented in the Kindergarten Guide is reiterated with the first grade emphasis.

The widely differing needs, interests, and expectations of first grade children should be addressed through personalized, multicultural, developmentally appropriate learning experiences. Children should be continually encouraged to recognize and respect other groups and individuals while developing their own identity and sense of self-worth.

(New York City Public Schools, 1991, viii)

The Introduction failed to discuss any of the content of Section 5, “Societal Concerns -- Children with Special Needs,” except to note that it “looks at current societal pressures and concerns affecting young children. Health problems, responsibilities for “latchkey” children, and alternative family structures are explored.” (NYC Public Schools, viii).

Sections 1 through 4 were similar in scope to the kindergarten curriculum. Section 1 was “Planning for the First Grade” with a focus on both developmentally appropriate multicultural activities and bilingual/ESL programs. Section 2, “Creating a Learning Environment”, addressed teaching strategies, with particular concern for incorporating cultural and linguistic diversity. Section 3, “Instructional Approaches and Strategies”, extended the concerns of Section 2 with greater attention to basic skills, literacy, and involving parents in children’s learning. This latter concern was expanded in Section 4, “Working Together”, with suggestions for developing positive school/home relationships.

Section 5 – Curricular Content

Ultimately, it was a small part of Section 5 that moved to

be most troublesome. Thus, that Section requires further scrutiny. The first part of this section addresses “Children with Special Needs.” “Desirable modes of behavior” for children are stressed early on. These include concerns for the feelings of others, acceptance of individual differences, and support for the insecure. Ways for the regular teacher to teach concepts to individual students with special needs were offered with a variety of teaching strategies, caveats, and suggested activities.

Following these nine pages came nine more on “Alcohol, Drug, and Substance Abuse.” The general approach is similar to that provided in the Kindergarten Guide, but there was a concerted emphasis, not seen the previous year, for young children prenatally exposed (PED) to drugs/alcohol. Characteristics of PED children, facilitative processes for classrooms with PED children, and a philosophy of such educational programs are offered. After this are included teaching strategies for at-risk children, generally. Despite the discomfort in acknowledging the existence of children in these situations, little or nothing was ever said criticizing this part of the curriculum.

The next part of the section was entitled “Understanding Family Structures to Meet Children’s Needs” and was three pages in length. The first page defined a family as “two or more people who share love, care, and responsibilities.” (New York City Public Schools, 1991, 137). This definition, which failed to mention marriage, was only the beginning of what would arouse the ire of many “critics” of the curriculum. The guide offered a number of family structures, many of which might be considered unconventional, most notably, lesbian/gay parents.

The guide presented the teacher’s role as determining the various family structures within the classroom and how to meet the individual needs of children in relation to this knowledge. Also of concern was where or how children were cared for after school. It was suggested that parent-teacher conferences were the best place to obtain such information because of the need for discretion, compassion, and time for discussion.

Caveats on activities that relate to the family are offered. For example, a child whose parent may have recently died may become distraught during discussions of family issues or “a child being raised by a single mother or by lesbian co-parents may not have a male figure to relate to during Father’s Day celebrations” (NYCPS, 1991, 137).

Teachers were urged to overcome any personal prejudices that they may have regarding cultural, social, or economic issues in order to create a sense of respect for the diversity of families. The subhead of the next part is entitled “Fostering Positive Attitudes Toward Sexuality”. Because the information proved to be so volatile and could be easily misconstrued when taken out of context, all four paragraphs of the part are reprinted below.

FOSTERING POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXUALITY

It is important for teachers of first graders to be aware of the changing concept of family in today’s society. To help teachers work effectively with every child, it is important to know that:

Children of lesbian/gay parents may have limited experience with male/female parental situations;

if there is no representation of their lives in the classroom, they may suddenly be made to feel different.

Children growing up in heterosexually headed families may be experiencing contact with lesbians/gays for the first time.

Many children have lesbian/gay relatives. According to statistics, at least 10 percent of each class will grow up to be homosexual. Because of pervasive homophobia (the irrational fear of homosexuals) in society, lesbian/gay teens are more likely to drop out of school, commit suicide, abuse drugs/alcohol, or get pregnant than the rest of their peers. Lesbian/gay students (or even those just perceived as gay) are frequently assaulted verbally and physically by other students and their parents. It is also common for them to be thrown out of their homes once their parents find out their child is gay.

Teachers of first graders have an opportunity to give children a healthy sense of identify at an early age. Classes should include references to lesbians/gay people in all curricular areas and should avoid exclusionary practices by presuming a person's sexual orientation, reinforcing stereotypes, or speaking of lesbians/gays as "they" or "other."

If teachers do not discuss lesbian/gay issues, they are not likely to come up. Children need actual experiences via creative play, books, visitors, etc. in order for them to view lesbians/gays as real people to be respected and appreciated. Educators have the potential to help increase the tolerance and acceptance of the lesbian/gay community and to decrease the staggering number of hate crimes perpetrated against them.

(New York City Public Schools, 1991, 138)

The next subhead was overcoming sexism, which provided relatively commonplace information and attitudes. It was noted that sexism was often perpetuated by television, books and family notions and that it was important to confront misconceptions "in order to show that men and women need not hold restricted work or family roles". (New York City Public Schools, 1991, 138). Criteria for determining appropriateness of books as to sexist attitudes and bias were given.

The next two sections gave a page of data on "Latchkey Children" and one on "Homeless/Shelter Children". There were then two pages on "Preventing Child Abuse". These focused on recognizing signs of abuse and helping children. The part was almost word for word from the Kindergarten Guide. Just to contextualize, in 1977, New York City had just over fourteen thousand reported cases of abuse and maltreatment. By 1985, with minimal growth in population, the number of reported cases had risen to more than 29 thousand and the next three years showed a steady increase -- just under 33 thousand in 1986, over 34 thousand in 1987, and over 40 thousand in 1988. Clearly there was a need for

vigilance and protective action on all "childhood fronts" with the school a prominent and logical source of aid.

The next part of Section 5 was "Facts about HIV Infection" and the four pages sought to alert teachers to the dangers as well as to clarify misconceptions about the disease. The first two topics, "Description and Cause of Aids" as well as "Clinical Manifestations" were sad, but straightforward information for the teacher. The next topic, "Transmission" was also solely for teacher information, though some teachers may have found some of the information disquieting. The spread of the disease through unprotected sexual intercourse mentioned anal intercourse and cautioned, "Anal intercourse is most risky, since tissue tearing and bleeding frequently occur." (New York City Public Schools, 1991, 145).

The topics of "Incidence" and "Research and Treatment" were largely scientific in scope and presentation. The last topic addressed "Responding to a Young Person's Questions: and had seven questions that children frequently asked about HIV and AIDS such as, "What is AIDS?" Two questions: "How do people 'catch' HIV?" and "Will I Get HIV?" both mentioned sharing unclean needles with an infected person and unprotected sexual intercourse.

To contextualize regarding HIV, there were 4,831 new AIDS cases diagnosed in New York City in 1987. 1988 saw 5,692 new cases, and 1989, 5,203. In 1990, the number of diagnosed cases dropped to 3,252, but the total number of AIDS cases was still enormous. ("Count of AIDS Cases."). Chancellor Fernandez later came under fire for making condoms available in school. In 1993 he noted,

I have taken a lot of heat in New York City since late 1991 when we introduced a "condom availability" plan in response to the AIDS plague and its deadly effect on our teenagers.

(Fernandez, 1993, 4)

Thus, attention in school to HIV and AIDS was certainly warranted.

The remainder of the English section and the entire Spanish section were relatively pedestrian. Overall, very little attention in the curriculum addressed issues of homosexuality. A number of bibliographic materials were suggested, but in the first printing of the guide, three children's books which would galvanize debate of the curriculum were not listed. By 1992, those books -- *Heather Has Two Mommies*, *Daddy's Roommate*, and *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride* had been added as had a host of other books and articles.

The curriculum was distributed to all school districts in the city during 1991-92 with the expectation that each local board would accommodate the materials in their planning for the 1992-93 school year. Before the 1991-92 school year ended, however, the *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum guide was plunged into controversy.

The Curriculum Controversy

Each of the local school boards has a certain degree of autonomy in New York City. Upon receiving a new curriculum, each local board is to examine the material and determine how best to implement it. This is usually a pro forma process, but not so with this curriculum. The New York City schools had been decentralized following a particularly bitter teachers' strike in 1968. In April

1969 then Governor Nelson Rockefeller signed the bill providing for community control in New York City schools through 32 community school districts, beginning with the elections of 1970. The effects of community control were not without problems. Diane Ravitch noted in her extensive history of the New York City schools, *The Great School Wars*,

The drive for community control was a direct assault on the idea of the common school, that is, a school which is supported by all, controlled by all, and which propagates no particular religious, ideological or political views. The advocates of community control wanted public schools supported by all, but controlled and ideologically directed by whomever won the local school board elections.

(Ravitch, 397)

This change in structure reflected what Larry Cuban saw as a change in public attitudes over a fifty-year period.

What had changed more than anything was public attitudes. Belief in the legitimacy of the school board and staff as guardians of children's intellectual and moral development had eroded. During the post-World War II years, confidence diminished in the public schools to do what they were supposed to do.

(Cuban, 161)

Thus, it was not surprising that there would be some "discourse", if not dissent, coming from some local school boards at the issuance of almost any directive emanating from the Central offices of the School District. In April 1992, the District 24 School Board in Queens announced it would not use the new curriculum guide for its first graders. Specifically, the board stated it would not allow use of the guide telling teachers to "be aware of valid family structures, including gay and lesbian parents." Mary Cummins, the president of the District 24 School Board was quoted as saying, "We do not tell first graders about homosexuals." (Willen, 1992a).

A district spokesperson defended the guide, noting that it is about tolerance and appreciating diversity, not promoting "gay and lesbian lifestyles." [In a trice, the discussion had shifted from the overall purpose and content of the curriculum to a narrow discussion of homosexuality]. A New York Civil Liberties Union representative said that the actions by District 24 raised issues of censorship and equality of education, while the Superintendent of local District 20 questioned the age appropriateness for the suggested texts, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*, and *Daddy's Roommate*.

In another section of this April, 1992 *Newsday* article, individuals were quoted as questioning the age-appropriateness of the books in question (but not the curriculum itself) as well as defending the books, (this latter action from a baby sitter who had read these books to her young charges and found them useful and understood).

The District 24 School Board had sent a letter in March to all the other districts in the city warning that the new curriculum was not consonant with local community standards. District 24 had previously passed a policy forbidding any discussion of homosexuality. Cummins noted that, "we did not want to teach anything that would conflict with a moral code or religion at home."

(Willen, 1992a). (Actually District 24 had forbade the mention of four words -- abortion, contraception, homosexuality, and masturbation in classes in the district). And, despite being a public board voted upon in a community-wide election, the District 24 School Board members were all white Roman Catholics and even included a priest. This in a district where more than 70 percent of the 27,000 students were members of minority groups and the district had one of the fastest growing immigrant populations in the city. Only one of the school board members still had children in the schools.

There was a certain irony in the impediments/recalcitrance of this local school board and its all-Catholic membership. It was the Catholic clergy and the Catholic hierarchy which originally and successfully challenged the Protestant control of New York's Public School Society in the Nineteenth Century.¹ To have the Catholics now be in the position of control and resistant to change was indeed ironic.

Because this controversy was as much about political positions as educational ones, it would be useful to briefly identify the District 24 School Board members.

Mary Cummins – president for the previous eight years, member for fifteen. She was viewed as a sharp critic of Chancellor Fernandez whom she had accused of "promoting sodomy." Cummins was active in her church.

Norma Cirino – vice-president. Board member for ten years. She was a retired District 24 teacher with no children and was a Democratic district leader of her local area.

Patricia Grayson – Board treasurer and board member for three years. She had two children who had graduated from District 24 schools. She was employed by the City in the Department of Sanitation.

Mary Crowley – Board secretary. She was a former teacher in District 24 as well as in area parochial schools and had been a board member for more than ten years. Crowley had fifteen children, some of whom graduated from District 24 schools, some from parochial schools.

Reverend John Garkowski – a School Board member for fifteen years, he served as Associate Pastor at St. Bartholomew Catholic Church and attorney for the Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens, specializing in immigration.

Robert Cermeli – Board member for three years. Cermeli was an architect for the City of New York and union representative for Civil Service Technical Guild, District Council 37. He had three children, all attending parochial schools.

Linda Sansinieri – four years on the board. A housewife who formerly worked for a local Democratic assemblyman, she had two children, both in parochial schools.

Two board members were appointed by the board in 1992 rather than elected to fill out two unexpired terms. One was Edward Bagley, III who ran for the board and lost in 1989. He was the only board member with children (two sons) who were attending district schools. A Consolidated Edison foreman, he served as head of the district curriculum committee, which had never discussed "Children of the Rainbow".

The second appointee was Theresa Feddern, a housewife whose three children had all graduated from District 24 schools. She had taught Catholic doctrine classes at the Sacred Heart Catholic Church.

The board's attorney was John Hartigan, who also had represented conservative New York City Central Board of Education members, Irene Impellizzeri and Michael Petrides. This was seen by some as a conflict of interest for it was the central board members who might have to resolve any dispute between the local board and the Chancellor's office.

This region of Queens, particularly the Glendale and Ridgewood neighborhoods, were not new to controversy involving change. Their conservative ideological views had been established as early as 1958 when the New York City Board of Education was attempting to integrate the city's schools. Queens parents demonstrated against integration as the Superintendent of Schools, John Theobald, "launched the first trial of permissive zoning: almost 400 black elementary pupils in Bedford-Stuyvesant were transferred to underutilized all-white schools in the Ridgewood and Glendale sections of Queens." (Ravitch, 259).

The response of these Queens communities was racist, but not surprising. These parents felt duped by the Superintendent and feared for their neighborhoods and property values. There were community protest meetings and school boycotts, but ultimately there was acquiescence. The members of the District 24 School Board would have remembered these earlier frays since these community members had grown up largely in these neighborhoods. The district also recently had sued the chancellor over a directive to give parents and teachers a say in the hiring of principals and assistant principals. (Fernandez/Underwood, 209).

Amidst this background, many parties then chose to enter this fray which had become extensively politicized. The curriculum itself seemed almost ancillary to the political and religious direction, which the District 24 school board had taken in pursuing the issue. On May 9, *Newsday* reported that Mary Cummins had rejected a plea by Commissioner Dennis DeLeon of the Human Rights Commission of New York to meet with the District 24 Board and ask it to consider using the guide. In response, Cummins asked where was the voice of human rights when St. Patrick's Cathedral was recently trashed by gay activists. Commissioner DeLeon found her response "disturbing." (Willen, 1992b).

In that same edition of *Newsday*, Richard Miller, the District 24 representative of the United Federation of Teachers and a social studies teacher, offered his view in a guest column entitled, "Trust Your Teachers." He noted that the guide was 443 pages with only two on gays and lesbians. The local board, he noted, wanted parents to believe that without a ban, homosexuality would be taught in the District 24 schools. Miller's response to this was "hogwash." Miller summed up his point thusly,

Teachers need to be able to be trusted and make appropriate decisions. What's next? Banning mention of divorce, unwed mothers, single adoptive parents or interracial marriage?

(Miller, 1992)

In other words, censorship is still censorship, no matter how you dress it up.

Letters printed by *Newsday* in subsequent days both supported and attacked Miller and his statements. Two gay parents, mothers of a three-year-old girl, wrote expressing their concern for sending their daughter to public schools, a concern validated by the District 24 School Board actions. (Shain and Kennedy, 1992).

In June, shortly before school dismissed for the summer, Chancellor Fernandez wrote a letter to all community school boards and superintendents in the city in which he emphasized that "all school districts must teach first grade students respect for gay families." (Willen, 1992c). According to a spokesman, Fernandez ordered boards to either adopt the *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum or come up with an alternative curriculum plan by June 30 or "he would run the multicultural curriculum himself." It was noted in the *Newsday* coverage that four other districts (other than 24) were deleting the section on alternative families. Positions seemed to be hardening, making any compromise more challenging. As he noted in his autobiography, Chancellor Fernandez had difficulties with the larger issue of decentralization and this controversy merely accentuated all that he saw wrong with community school boards.

Decentralization created what was essentially a two-headed monster: one, the thirty-two districts where community boards were given almost total control of the elementary and middle schools (and in far too many cases took advantage of that autonomy to create, in the worst New York City tradition, their own corrupt little fiefdoms, complete with cronyism and nepotism, and a depressing sense of mismanagement); and two, the more than five thousand-man central bureaucracy headquartered at 110 Livingston Street in Brooklyn where the seven-member Board of Education, made up of appointees from each of the five boroughs and two from the mayor's office, held policy-making sway over the system and its titular leader, the chancellor.

(Fernandez/Underwood, 188)

It was at this point that journalists outside the New York City region first noticed the Rainbow Curriculum controversy. John Leo, contributing editor from *US News and World Report* contributed an editorial to the *Seattle Times* which brought the issues to the attention of readers on the West Coast. Leo claimed to like the Rainbow Curriculum, but felt that there were books celebrating diversity, rather than respecting it. Most of his concern was for *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy's Roommate* (Newman, L. and Willhoite, M.) and why the curriculum was pushing (my emphasis) stories like those. He saw the guide pushing positive aspects of each type of household, but felt that a line was being crossed from tolerance to approval endorsement. Leo sought a value-neutral curriculum, he said. Such a position in this issue was almost certainly impossible, but Leo's writing had the ring of logical truth to it for many people. Leo picked up on an article in a conservative New York City weekly that claimed the Chancellor's office was practicing "academic imperialism" and that 70%-90% of Americans would disagree with the doctrines being put forth in the curriculum, i.e., appreciation of the homosexual "lifestyle."

Within a week, Leo's guest editorial was published, almost verbatim, in the August 17 edition of *US News and World Report*.

The Rainbow Curriculum, as presented by John Leo, became a National issue and that issue was the promotion of homosexuality, particularly through the (mandated) use of two books!

The fall of 1992 seemed to be the time of a “showdown” between the Chancellor and the four or five recalcitrant districts. In September the Chancellor extended the deadline to October 31 for individual districts to submit to him their plans on teaching about gay families without bias. (Willen, 1992d). Fernandez extended that deadline to November 13 because four of the dissenting districts were now talking with the Chancellor’s staff about their plans. District 24 was still not budging.

Finally on December 1, Chancellor Fernandez suspended the entire District 24 School Board. On that same day *Newsday* noted a variety of issues that were plaguing Fernandez and causing problems in the schools. These included the Rainbow Curriculum, budget problems, and the overall difficulties in dealing with Queens School District 24. (Willen, 1992e). The District 24 School Board stated, through their attorney, Hartigan, “we won’t crawl” in defying the Chancellor’s orders to appear. Hartigan also said the *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum needs to have more on discouraging religious intolerance and not have “misinformation about sodomy.” (Negron and Willen, 1992).

A few days later (December 6) George Will’s column, carried in scores of newspapers (including *The Washington Post*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*), focused on his perception of the *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum. Clearly picking up on John Leo’s lead and most likely not having read the materials in question, Will railed against Fernandez and “the homosexual aspects of the curriculum” —the mention of anal intercourse, dental dams, the choice of homosexuality and, particularly, the two book—*Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy’s Roommate*. Will derided the characterization of homosexuality as “just another kind of love.” Will’s attack brought national attention and notoriety to the curriculum controversy and constituted a significant blow in eroding Fernandez’s support.

At this same time the *New York Times*, much closer to the controversy, in both proximity and knowledge, published a forceful editorial strongly defending Chancellor Fernandez. The *Times* summed up their perspective on the events involving District 24 and the Chancellor. “Mrs. Cummins chose to replace meaningful discourse with what Mr. Fernandez accurately described as ‘a malicious and highly organized campaign’ to distort the curriculum suggested in *Children of the Rainbow* and spread fear among parents.” (“Chancellor Fernandez Stands Tall”, 1992).

The next week, the Central Board voted 6 to 0 to nullify Fernandez’s suspension of the local board, instead urging another try at negotiation. Notwithstanding, the District 24 Board refused to negotiate, even after making preliminary agreements on mediators for both sides. (Berger, J. 1992).

Shortly after this, H. Carl McCall, president of the Central Board, criticized Fernandez for having weak aides in the area of multiculturalism and also announced that Evelyn Kalibala had been replaced as director of multicultural education. At this same time it was revealed that Elissa Weindling, the gay/lesbian appointee to the curriculum revision group that developed the first grade curriculum had not wanted the controversial books in question listed

on the suggested readings and was surprised that they had been included (Berger, 1992b).

That week Steven Myers, a *New York Times* reporter, tried to unravel how the situation got so entangled. Myers noted the irony of “a curriculum intended to foster tolerance has deeply divided the city and provoked vicious expressions of intolerance, including two threats on the Chancellor’s life.” (Myers, 1992). He went on to point out that the controversy over one minute section of the curriculum had completely obscured what was actually in the curriculum. The demonizing of Chancellor Fernandez by the District 24 School Board was largely credited for this sad state of affairs, but the media were also criticized for sensationalizing the issue and for implying that the curriculum only talked about being gay.

Two weeks later, Josh Barbanel, also of the *New York Times*, provided his perspective on the controversy. Barbanel placed the curriculum dispute into a large, historical context. First, he noted that District 24 was already feuding with Chancellor Fernandez on other social issues when the *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum was first distributed. The larger issue of the role moral values should play in schools and who should determine those values was at the core of feuds with District 24.

Barbanel then traced the involvement of gay activists in the curricular process. When an Advisory Board on multiculturalism was formed in the late 1980s or early 1990s, there were no gay or lesbian representatives included. But with political support from allies in the Mayor’s office, two representatives were named to the panel and gay/lesbian issues “were incorporated into a school policy adopted by the Board in November 1989” (Barbanel, 1992). But no real action occurred and frustrated gay/lesbian groups tried repeatedly for a voice in one curriculum after another. Elissa Weindling, a 31-year old lesbian first grade teacher, was invited to join in the revision of the first grade curriculum following continued pressure from Mayor Dinkins’ educational adviser. As noted earlier, Weindling and Evelyn Kalibala, the director of multicultural education, identified *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy’s Roommate* as too difficult for first graders and these books were to be excised from the final draft. Their views were ignored or rejected on the basis that the books still might be appropriate for teacher use.

The curriculum issue had not been resolved and on February 10 the Central Board voted 4-3 not to renew Chancellor Fernandez’s contract when it expired on June 30. The five-hour meeting consisted of acrimonious debate and “testimony” for and against Fernandez’s retention. Fernandez was criticized for an inattention to instructional issues, particularly basic skills, but also for focusing on “peripheral” issues like condoms and tolerance. He was also called overly authoritarian and a micro-manager. (Randolph, 1993).

The arguments over the Rainbow Curriculum faded quietly away with no real resolution. In May 1993 in a remarkably low voter turnout of less than 15%, many local school districts elected more conservative candidates, prompting one observer to note that “few teachers are likely to have the courage to teach the Rainbow Curriculum”.

In June of 1994 May Cummins and District 24 were back in the news, though briefly. Cummins was accused of slurring a new District 24 board member, Louisa Chan. Cummins also

announced her retirement, but when Chan speculated that there might have been pressure brought to bear on Cummins to resign, Cummins promptly rescinded her resignation.

A week later, the District 24 School Board voted 7-2 to accept the new, revised Rainbow Curriculum (new name, no gays or lesbians) with five objections/suggestions, including eliminating three pages that mentioned homophobia. The new president, Mary Crowley, stated that the board thought this was the right thing to do for the district's children. Mary Cummins and newly elected Frank Borzelleri, who called multiculturalism anti-American, voted against approval. (Kim, 1994).

In February 1999, a gay candidate for the District 24 Board of Education lost, receiving only 655 of the 1,650 votes needed for election. (Gendar, 1999).

Is This a Curricular Story?

The controversy over the Rainbow Curriculum was, to a large degree, only remotely connected to the curriculum and to curricular issues. Josh Barbanell summed it up this way, "The fight over the Rainbow Curriculum has little to do with education and much to do with New York City politics, where race, ethnicity, and religion have always played big roles," (Barbanell, 1992). But this conclusion ignores the unfortunate political entanglement that has ensnared education, particularly curriculum. So many curricular decisions are now politically driven. The entire standards movement of the 1990s and beyond has been generated by politicians. Even though many educators have ultimately embraced this issue of standards, that is more a reflection of reality than anything else.

Homophobia is still a way to score political points with many constituents, particularly conservatives and fundamentalists (often the same). As educators, being anti-homosexuality on any issue involving schools is akin to being against flag burning. Yet it is very difficult, courageous, and almost suicidal, politically, to speak out forcefully against homophobia. But educators can find support and direction for such issues as overcoming heterosexism and other areas that were presented in the *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum.¹ Marinoble (1997) offers some suggestions for gaining administrative and parental support for addressing such issues. Such suggestions might have been beneficial in promoting the *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum, though given all the other issues intertwined with this curriculum, the efforts might still have been futile.² Nevertheless, there are educators and parents for whom the perceived immorality of homosexuality overwhelms any concerns with justice and fairness. This is not just a lesson, historically, it is still true in most districts in the U.S. in the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The Media

The entire Rainbow Curriculum issue could not, indeed, would not, have become the national, or even the city, issue without the almost constant coverage of the daily newspaper press (an issue nearly ignored by the national news magazines). Despite the seemingly neutral position of a free press, there was far more underlying the curricular issues of this period of time. Indeed, there was a tremendous battle for readership among the *New York Times*, the *New York Daily News*, and the *New York Post*. The real

skirmish pitted the latter two papers and the middle class tabloid readers that these papers relied upon. The *Times* readership was relatively steady, but external factors pitted the *Daily News* and the *Post* into a death spiral that also brought in the Long Island daily, *Newsday*.

In the Fall of 1991, the *Daily News* was picketed and shut down by striking unions. For more than three months, the paper was crippled. At about the same time, the *Post*, which had been in financial turmoil, was purchased by Rupert Murdoch. The character of the *Post* was altered and this new "persona" savored and sought to exploit the sensationalist aspects of the *Children of the Rainbow* Curriculum.

With the *Daily News* shut down and the *Post* struggling, the publishers of *Newsday* saw a chance to step into the breach and capture a large number of New York City readers. This was to be accomplished through a New York City edition of *Newsday* with special bureaus for each of the boroughs of New York. Almost all of the Rainbow Curriculum stories came from the Queens bureau. In a one-year period from March of 1992 to February of 1993, *Newsday* had over 150 articles on the *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum, almost all from the Queens bureau. Without this dedicated commitment to publicizing every comment of Mary Cummins and the District 24 Board, this story would have been far quieter.

Alas, for *Newsday* a New York City edition was not successful. From 1991 to 1995 losses mounted. In 1995 *Newsday* was purchased by the Times Mirror Company, publishers of the *Los Angeles Times*. Times-Mirror made dramatic cuts in personnel and plans and *Newsday* returned, exclusively, to its Long Island base.

The national press, too, gave unprecedented coverage to the Rainbow curriculum, but with an agenda nearly identical to that of Mary Cummins and her colleagues at District 24. John Leo picked up the issue first, but focused almost exclusively on homosexuality. His columns in the *Seattle Times* and *U.S. News and World Report* were later emulated by George Will in his syndicated column. Then identical *Associated Press* stories focusing, once again, on the homosexuality aspects of the curriculum appeared in Des Moines, Las Vegas, Boston, and Phoenix with subsequent, uniformed editorials being published in San Diego, Salt Lake City, among others. This was an issue that spun out of control early on, leaving the curricular substance far behind the spectra of homosexuality.

Of course the lack of control can be blamed somewhat on the Chancellor and his aides. Central Board President McCall pressured Fernandez successfully, but too late, to replace the aides dealing with the *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum. Fernandez, himself, recognized the volatility and complexity of the issue far too late also. When hired, instructional issues were seen as his chief weakness. The Rainbow Curriculum controversy dramatically emphasized that weakness. Fernandez's efforts to bargain with District 24 from his position of power ultimately led to charges of authoritarianism and micro management. The Chancellor's power eroded as he conceded that he had not read the entire curriculum, and his final agreement in December of 1992 to drop the demand that first graders had to deal with gays/lesbians in all curricular areas. At that time, he told superintendents that they could postpone until the fifth or sixth grade lessons about gay/lesbian families.

In a spectacular display of poor timing, Fernandez's memoir, *Tales out of School*, appeared in 1993. As noted earlier, the book skewered a number of people on the Central Board and in New York City, politics and Fernandez came off as arrogant and aloof. It also contained an amazingly prescient comment on his tenure in the New York City Public Schools. "I don't expect to be running it (the school system) much longer because you can't separate politics and education in America and the politics in New York are almost certain to bring me down sooner or later". (Fernandez/Underwood, 13). All of this did culminate, of course, in his contract not being renewed beyond June 1993.

So, the *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum disappeared from the New York City schools. One would hope its passing might have been accompanied by Judy Garland's rendition of "Over the Rainbow."

Notes

¹ See for example Sears, J., Editor, *Sexuality and the Curriculum* or Sears, J. and W. Williams, Editors, *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia* (1997).

² An interesting reinforcement of this is provided in a *New York Times* column on January 5, 2000 by Ramon Cortines, Fernandez's successor as Chancellor. He asserts that the issue of the *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum was the reason for Fernandez's dismissal.

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