

Schools versus Prejudice

GEORGE W. DENEMARK

Better intercultural attitudes can be built through democratic experiential education in our American schools. Professor George W. Denemark, School of Education, Boston University, outlines five major approaches to the reduction of prejudice.

TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS committed to the task of promoting in their students intercultural attitudes consistent with the American Creed can find much of interest and of use in recent research reports on prejudice.¹ Emerging out of the welter of suggestions from numerous well-intentioned sources to which many educators have been exposed in recent years, is a clearer conception of the nature of prejudice and of the most effective means for combating it. Worthy intentions are increasingly capable of being coupled with a real understanding of the dynamics of attitude change.

A survey of contemporary research studies discloses an emphasis upon two elements as major sources of prejudiced attitudes in young people. One is the repeated frustration of the individual and the resultant tensions thus aroused which demand an outlet. The second source is the existence of such attitudes in parents and other groups with which the child associates—attitudes which are quickly learned and frequently adopted by him.

¹ The remarks which follow are based upon a research project conducted by William Van Til and the author at the University of Illinois, with the financial assistance of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. The project was reported in the October 1950 issue of the *Review of Educational Research*.

Prejudice has been found in numerous cases to be coincident with recurrent and marked frustrations of young people as they sought to cope with the developmental tasks of their own maturity level. Society, while rigorously defining these tasks, has frequently done little to facilitate their satisfactory achievement. Contradictions have existed in the expectations of home and school, of church and peer group, and a host of other social groups. These contradictions have resulted in unresolved tensions which all too frequently spill over in the form of hostility and aggression toward minority group members.

The character of contemporary society, imposing particularly burdensome tensions and insecurities upon parents, leaves its stamp at the same time upon their children. As a consequence, these children are often denied the warmth of affection, continuous encouragement in their explorations of the world in which they live, and the security that comes with membership in a family group that is close-knit and stable—conditions which are all so important in building healthy personalities.

Schools Affect Prejudices

Data on changing family functions and the extent to which today's families

are being broken by discord and divorce are familiar to most teachers. The impact of such factors upon the intergroup attitudes of the children of these families is perhaps not so familiar. A recent study of prejudiced persons revealed that in the backgrounds of the forty subjects selected for the study there was not a single example of a permanently well-adjusted marital relationship between their parents.²

Too frequently such evidence is interpreted by teachers as indicating the futility of efforts by the school to change pupil attitudes in the face of adverse home conditions. Instead they should recognize that to many children school can be a haven from, rather than a continuation of, the tensions and insecurities generated elsewhere.

Potential school sources of frustration for many students exist in the imposition of subject matter only remotely, if at all, related to their immediate problems, and in the conception of the classroom as a place primarily intended to inculcate passivity and conformity rather than imagination, responsiveness and creativity.

Another source of tension may be found in employment of grading systems which maximize the worst aspects of competition and ignore the necessity for success experiences for all but a small minority of the group. Tacit approval of classroom conduct and extracurricular activities which perpetuate and promote cliques and social class distinctions is still another. Tensions built up in these school situations, when coupled with those originating in the

family and elsewhere, necessitate an outlet. The channel for their release often becomes the expression of hostility toward minority group members.

Prejudices Are Learned

Significant as are these sources of frustration in development of prejudice in many children, it is important to recognize that not all bigoted attitudes are traceable to such an origin. Prejudices expressed by some children seem to be nothing more than learned behavior. The child's conceptions of himself and of others are so heavily influenced by the social environment that the well-adjusted child too may express strong intergroup prejudices simply as a result of indoctrination in, and habituation to, adult anti-democratic values. Here too, as in the case of frustration as a source of prejudice, it is true that the influence of home and family is of key importance, and yet the potentialities of the school for introducing alternative ideas and broadening perspectives should not be overlooked.

Insensitivity to the role they play in this respect may result not only in little help by teachers in building accurate conceptions of out-group members, but also in actual perpetuation of existing unfavorable stereotypes. A recent study of the treatment given minority groups in over three hundred textbooks revealed that many such books perpetuated negative stereotypes of minority groups, usually not because of any malicious intent but rather because of insensitivity, limited treatment and important omissions.³

² Nathan W. Ackerman and Marie Jahoda, *Anti-Semitism and Emotional Disorder* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950).

³ Howard E. Wilson and Others, *Intergroup Relations in Teaching Materials* (Washington, D. C.: American Council on Education, 1949).

Attitudes of teachers and administrators and of other pupils are important factors in the determination of the attitudes of those with whom they come in contact. Failure to recognize this responsibility may mean that many children have an opportunity to learn about other racial, religious and ethnic groups only in terms of stereotypes and rejection.

SCHOOLS CAN BUILD BETTER INTERCULTURAL ATTITUDES

Given such an understanding of the nature of prejudice, what then? What can schools do toward building better intercultural attitudes? Recent research has suggested five major approaches to the problem.

Create Democratic Atmosphere

The first approach, and one which we have already to some degree discussed, is *the creation of a democratic atmosphere designed to reduce the personal insecurities and tensions of children*. A permissive atmosphere in which pupils and teacher plan together the experiences they will have is important, both as it is oriented around the real problems and concerns of the children, and as it employs a methodology or approach to those problems which provides an opportunity for wide participation, self-expression, and cooperation with others. The intimate relationship between content and method is nowhere better illustrated than here. The personality of the teacher and the warmth and genuine respect for the personalities of others which he can demonstrate daily in countless ways can also do much to create and maintain such an atmosphere.

Deliberate provision for opportunities for each child to experience success frequently in a wide range of activities is still another important factor. The school program that is rich and varied in order to develop and reward talent and achievement in mechanical, aesthetic, physical and social activities as well as strictly intellectual ones can do much to promote a healthy school climate in which democratic attitudes can grow. This is applicable to both regular classroom activities and to the extra-curricular program of the school. But there is little need to go on. Each teacher can doubtless call to mind a dozen ways in which he can bring democracy to his classroom.

Encourage Intergroup Contacts

A second approach to intercultural attitude change which has received consideration and support in recent research is *the encouragement of broadening intergroup contacts in situations involving cooperation*. Experiences in the military services during the past war with mixed combat units and the utilization of joint facilities lead to the generalization that members of different cultural groups placed together in situations necessitating cooperation will grow to respect one another and approve of such contacts.⁴ Such an approach seems to be most effective when the attention of the group is focused upon concrete tasks and objectives rather than upon more abstract considerations of justice.

⁴ Samuel A. Stouffer, Edward A. Suchman, Leland C. DeVinney, Shirley A. Star and Robin M. Williams, Jr., *The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949).

There seems little evidence to indicate that such an approach could not be similarly effective with children in school situations. Admittedly, however, one important factor in the changes reported among troops was that most of the experiences occurred overseas, where pressures to conform to the standards of their home membership groups were at a minimum. One implication of this latter factor may be that teachers seeking to employ the contact approach need to be particularly sensitive to the conditions accompanying such contacts. They should seek to orient contact situations around problems which are real and specific, but which are yet sufficiently novel to avoid the possibility of having associated with them a large body of previously formed negative reactions.

There is evidence to support the approach of the teacher or administrator who acts on the assumption that members of various racial, religious and ethnic groups can and will work together harmoniously. It has been found that those who take the American Creed literally and assume that others will abide by it, encounter much less opposition than if they approach the situation more cautiously and obliquely by asking for reactions to such contacts. Doubt apparently breeds doubt in such matters. The *fait accompli* here, as in matters of politics, has demonstrated its effectiveness. It is important to recognize that this approach to intercultural attitude change should be accompanied by other approaches, so that the prejudiced child will not come to regard such contacts merely as unique exceptions to his previously formulated generalizations.

Provide Emotional Sensitization

A third approach involves *the provision of opportunities for enhanced emotional sensitization to other cultural groups*. Research has pointed to the importance of the emotional as well as the cognitive and action phases of intergroup attitudes, and yet most of our attempts at attitude change have been couched largely in terms of providing facts. While the necessity for providing valid data is indisputable, many children lack the experience from which they can interpret such data. Consequently they respond, if at all, only in the grossest and least sensitive manner.

The capacity for empathy or the ability to place oneself in the role of others needs much development in many children. One important way in which the classroom teacher can broaden the base from which his pupils view and react to other group members is through use of literature which emphasizes human relations themes.⁵ Similarly movies, radio scripts and recordings which portray the contributions and problems of various cultural groups in an honest and sympathetic way may have an initial impact upon children who have heretofore had no awareness of any problems in this area.

As one of the reports from the Philadelphia Early Childhood Project pointed out, the principal value of literature lies in the extent to which it can re-enforce, interpret and extend the ex-

⁵ See publications of the Staff of Intergroup Education in Cooperating Schools, *Reading Ladders for Human Relations and Literature for Human Understanding* (Washington, D. C.: American Council on Education).

perience of children.⁶ We should be aware that approaches which emphasize feeling must be accompanied by some rational translation of the emotional reactions generated into a set of values, if the changes effected are to be of more than temporary duration. Move students emotionally, yes, but accompany this by the clarification of the scientific base upon which such healthy attitudes rest.

Expose Inconsistency of Attitudes

This suggests a fourth approach to attitude change in the schools; namely, *the promotion of situations in which individuals may be exposed to the inconsistency or invalidity of some of their existing attitudes.* Increasing recognition has been accorded the technique of action research in providing data which will substantiate or modify student attitudes toward other persons and groups.

Evidence which a pupil has gathered on his own in conjunction with a school group investigating community conditions has on many occasions been found to be more likely to involve attitude changes in the student than has the "ready made" data, no matter how complete, which the teacher may be able to provide.

The teacher who plans for and encourages class projects which involve analyses of community conditions and discussions of the implications of these conditions for all members of the community can do much to build better intergroup attitudes. Similarly, the ad-

ministrator who encourages his staff to embark upon such projects and consciously promotes closer relationships between school and community can help to make possible learning situations in which children may become deeply involved because of their active participation in all stages of the problem.

Strengthen Support of Democratic Behavior

A fifth approach which research has indicated as important, is that of *strengthening the social supports of democratic behavior.* There is little likelihood that modifications of attitudes effected in the classroom will be permanent if the institutional structure and group pressures in the school and larger community are all unfavorable to the desired attitudes, and all remain unchanged. Class activities need to be accompanied by vigorous and courageous interpretation of democracy as applied to intergroup relations.

Policies of the school with respect to equality of opportunity for student office-holding and honors attainment, to equal access to all of the facilities of the school, and to the non-discriminatory character of clubs and athletic teams, as well as the impartiality of teachers to students of all cultural groups in matters of personal attention, grades and so on, need to be exemplary. Uncompromising policies on such matters are important because of the clarification and support they lend to democratic behavior. Healthy intergroup attitudes have a much better opportunity of being expressed if the group environment guarantees them backing.

Nor can the role of the teacher in community affairs be overlooked. Ac-

⁶ Helen G. Trager and Roberta M. Everitt, "Tools for Human Relations Education." *Educational Leadership* 7:530-539 (May 1950).

tive support of fair employment and education practices legislation and vigorous enforcement of these, support of policies of non-discrimination in housing, eating places and recreational facilities, and similar activities having for their purpose the democratization of the community, all serve to establish a social environment for children which encourages healthy intergroup attitudes.

Employment of posters and literature seeking to promote better human relations on a mass basis appears to be relatively ineffective in itself. This is the case because of the ease with which those to whom it is most applicable may ignore or distort its meaning. However, such techniques are valuable in

that they encourage the overt expression of democratic attitudes in a community or school environment where the dominant attitude differs.

The activities suggested in the preceding paragraphs are by no means new to forward-looking teachers and administrators. Many of these activities have long been part of the programs of our better elementary and secondary schools. However, until recently many such practices were not seen in their relationship to attitude changes in children. It is indeed gratifying to find that the indications from contemporary research concerned with intercultural attitude change lend further support to the case for democratic experimental education in our American schools.

Social Education: A Dual Job

JAMES L. HYMES, JR.

Educators must again see their task as twofold, involving both person and content. James L. Hymes, Jr., is Professor of Education at George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, Tennessee.

HOW ARE YOU going to educate children for kindness? For decency, for generosity, for thoughtfulness? How do you build a sympathy that cares about the other fellow? A reasonableness that is willing to talk things over rather than attack first and hit? A peacefulness that is strong and sturdy and confident? How do you develop people who aren't out to get the other fellow but who are capable of anger, when that is right, capable of determination, capable of courage? People who want to live and

who want others to live, to live well and fully; people who want a good life for themselves and a good life for others?

Instruction must be a part of the answer. Youngsters growing up need to come to know what the score is. They need chances to spot the pressure points of decency, chances to work for what they want and to work against what they don't want. They need facts to go on, skills they can use with their facts, values that will give these a direction.

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