

the class chairman who had previously been very bitter toward the Negro. "The Negroes who visited our school yesterday helped me to understand the Negro better. People with prejudice against the Negro have no logical or scientific basis for their attitude."

Class members realized that their study had not finally solved one of the nation's most perplexing problems. But they felt that programs of this kind could surely point toward development of more helpful and hopeful attitudes for the future.

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## *The Educative Use of Controversy*

KENNETH D. BENNE and LEO MOLINARO

**How can school people gain skill in using controversy educatively? This question is discussed by Kenneth D. Benne, Professor of the Philosophy of Education, and Leo Molinaro, University Fellow, Social Foundations of Education, University of Illinois, Urbana.**

SINCE the days of the Great Depression, when confusions and conflicts in American and also in world culture became visible to all, curriculum theorists have held that some portion of the instructional program of the schools should be focused upon the study of areas of contemporary social controversy. Justification for this principle rests essentially on two grounds: (1) Areas of controversy represent the unfinished agenda of a society, the points at which "the public" is in process of making up its mind. Through encouraging honest and responsible study of such areas, schools have their greatest opportunity to help in building public opinion that is better informed and more intelligent with respect to the urgent choices which confront our people. (2) Democratic citizens need skills and methods of discussion, communication and criticism which function effectively in dealing with situations marked

by divided and conflicting opinions, interests and attitudes. Students can best learn these skills as they openly study and discuss live issues of current controversy and become consciously and critically disciplined in the use of such skills and methods.

Yet, however cogent the justification for the responsible study of controversial issues in schools may seem to students of education, the movement in the public schools toward a major emphasis upon such study has been disappointingly slow. In some school systems in which instructional programs have been changed for a time to make a significant place for the serious study of controversial social problems, vigorous reaction from powerful segments of the adult public, not seldom abetted by parts of the professional teaching group, have forced curricular retreat to the dubious haven of emphasis on "non-controversial essentials."

## Conflict Is Part of Contemporary Experience

During this period of sporadic sorties and retreats on the curriculum front, the professional literature on "how to teach controversial issues" (and there has been a more or less steady stream of writings on this theme) has tended to develop a somewhat unreal and ritualized quality. There seems to be an assumption in much of this literature that teachers, administrators and parents have a choice as to whether or not the tides of contemporary social controversy will enter the snug harbors of our schools, whether or not social controversies shall be kept out of the schools, whether or not the schools shall deal with controversial issues. This is clearly a false assumption. Teachers, administrators and parents have no choice at this level. Conflict and controversy are part of contemporary experience in our culture. They are part of the experience of children, as well as of teachers, administrators and parents.

As an integral part of children's contemporary experience, social conflict and controversy are unavoidably present in the school. For example, children on the playground convert the traditional game of cops and robbers into a game of F.B.I. and Communists. . . . Children in the suburban school express their hatred against the labor leader in the current strike and ridicule into silence the feeble protests of the one or two small "laborites" who may be in the group (the opposite might well be happening in a school in the "labor end" of town). . . . Children group themselves in classroom and on playground along lines of race or faith

or social class, with resulting intergroup hostility always implicitly present, and with hostility sometimes breaking out into open struggle during times of frustration. . . . etc.

The choice available to teachers, administrators and parents is actually *how* shall we deal with social controversy and conflict as they unavoidably come into the schools? What attitudes shall we take toward controversy and conflict and, by example and practice, encourage our students to take? Our basic working beliefs about people and human relations are always revealed and tested in conflict situations, in which human beings are pitted against other human beings, where power is being rechanneled. What beliefs about people are implicit in the largely unconscious and habitual ways of dealing with controversy which we normally employ outside the schools and which, by default, we tend to reinforce in the schools? Are these the beliefs we consciously profess? Which sets of beliefs do we choose to propagate through the schools? In brief, the actual choice is, to put it oversimply, do we wish to treat social controversy, as it comes into schools unavoidably, in a way to maximize its "educative" or its "miseducative" effects on children and young people?

## Informed Decisions Are Better

To return once more to the tendency in much discussion of "how to deal with controversial issues." Having assumed—falsely, as we see it—that we may choose to deal with controversial issues in schools or not, professional discussion frequently attempts to reassure reluctant parents, teachers or adminis-

trators that schools will and should so deal with controversy as not to influence decisions of students with respect to the issues treated. Mixed with advocacy of the idea that all alternative positions and proposals in an area of controversy studied should be honestly and responsibly discussed and criticized, there is also in this conception of the educative use of controversy a flavor of bargaining and compromise between those who believe that considered, critical and informed decisions are *better* than ill-considered, uncritical and ignorant decisions and those who do not. In a recent treatment of this question we find by implication this notion of a bargain between school and public with respect to the treatment of controversial issues: "And, of course, keep your weight off the decision. The teacher and the schools are not arbiters of social questions. The basic assumption underlying the school's presenting controversial questions at all is that it will throw no official weight into influencing the student one way or another."<sup>1</sup>

If we are right in our argument so far, schools are now unavoidably dealing with social controversies in one way or another. If they are dealing with these by methods of suppression, neglect or indirection, they are nevertheless influencing the decisions of students with respect to these issues, albeit such influences are *miseducative* as we see them. If we are to advocate alternatively *educative* ways of dealing with controversial issues in schools, are we

not, if we are honest with ourselves, advocating *educative* influences upon decisions which students make with respect to the unsettled questions of our time and society? Presumably we want processes of study, discussion and deliberation which go on in schools to make a difference in the actual conduct of students who have been involved in these processes. The bridge between study, discussion and deliberation on the one hand and actual conduct on the other is *decision*. For schools to deny responsibility for the decisions which students make consequent to their study and discussion is also to deny responsibility for the effects of schooling upon conduct. We believe attempts to compromise between *education* and *miseducation* are bound to lead to such an unpalatable conclusion.

It is our conviction that, in part at least, the general ineffectuality of our efforts as a profession to make a larger place for the open and responsible study of social controversies in the school program and our tendency toward irrealism and self-sterilization in thinking as a profession about the educational use of controversy stem from common roots. We have not as a profession clearly accepted conflict and controversy as inescapable features of contemporary experience. Nor have we helped the adult public which defines the effective field of our enterprise as educators to face social controversy as an omnipresent feature of contemporary culture. Further, we as a profession have not distinguished clearly between educative and miseducative methods of dealing with controversy. Nor have we clearly defined the underlying attitudes and beliefs which support and ration-

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<sup>1</sup> Wilhelms, Fred T., "Letter to a Teacher: On Handling Controversial Questions." *Progressive Education*, Vol. 26, No. 1, Oct. 1948, p. 9. This entire number is concerned with "The Teaching of Social Issues."

alize these contrasting methods. Neither have we helped the adult public to develop this distinction within their own group experience of social controversy.

#### MISEDUCATIVE METHODS

What, then, are *miseducative* methods of dealing with conflict and controversy? Basic to these methods is a root fear of controversy *per se*. It is a fear grounded in experience of the human ill-effects of conflict in the absence of adequate disciplines to deal with it creatively and educationally. It is a fear which tends to blind us to the presence of contemporary conflict. It is a fear which leads us to the inadequate diagnosis of conflict as stemming from trouble-making people, people who aren't quite "nice." If people, including children and young people, were just "nicer" there wouldn't be controversy and conflict.

#### Methodology of Coercion

A miseducative methodology consistent with this attitude is the methodology of coercion. Confronted with the threat of conflicting interests and opinions, those in power coerce into silence the less powerful conflicting interests and opinions. The situation is restored to a condition of surface stability. Truly enough, the stability is purchased at a price. Those with differing opinions do not learn from each other, the difficulties underlying the controversy are not constructed into a common and intelligible problem, the possibility of all concerned working together to create a common and rational solution is lost. Resentment, hostility and furtive rebellion and sabotage or, alternatively, sub-human acquiescence in domination are

the learning products. In brief, such methodology is basically miseducative.

Of course, the method may be rationalized as "educative" if the established and enforced value system is seen as inherently and unalterably "right." On such a view, the development of differences (aberrations) in individuals and groups threatens the entire "true" system. Conflict and controversy in such situations would represent evils to be suppressed at all costs. Thus the rationalization supports the fear of conflict which, we have noted, underlies the use of this miseducative method.

#### Methodology of Compromise

Another miseducative methodology for dealing with conflict and controversy in community and in schools is the method of compromise in any of its various forms. Where power is so equally divided among various conflicting interests and opinions that coercion by any one interest is "impracticable," some *modus vivendi* is worked out which satisfies no one but which spares the parties to the conflict the rigors of studying and learning together toward a common and rational resolution of the differences. This method is frequently identified with the method of democracy. School administrators pride themselves on their skill in balancing and compromising conflicting factions in the faculty and the community. Teachers identify democratic leadership with the adroit working out of compromises among conflicting groups in the classroom or on the playground. The rationalization which supports the method invokes the virtue of grudging tolerance toward the other fellow's or group's uninfluenced point of view.

Each man has a right to his own opinion, we say. But in areas of conflict and controversy, when the public weal or woe is at stake in the outcome, could this not become a doctrine of despair? How can men properly claim the right to proudly ill-informed, uncriticized and unconsidered private opinions when the responsibility is clearly one of joining in common efforts to determine which opinions are better than others?

What advocates of the methodology of compromise as the democratic ideal usually ignore is the basic kinship between its rationale and that of the method of coercion. Neither settles the issue at the heart of the controversy. Both wall off the contestants from the communication and collaboration which alone can lead to the re-education of both toward a common and rational solution. Both stabilize the hostilities and frustrations which persist and tend to grow in a condition of non-communication among opposed groups. Both are inherently *miseducative* methods.

Underlying the advocacy and use of both methods is some combination or other of the following beliefs: (1) Men, at least the men of other factions than my own, are things to be put or kept in their places rather than valuable, unique centers of thought and feeling from whom I can learn (and who can learn from me), precisely because they do differ from me (and I from them). (2) Human interests, attitudes and ideologies are inherently rigid and unchanging—learning of new interests, attitudes and ideologies is virtually impossible. (3) The honest consideration of values alternative to my own constitutes a threat to my own, which by definition are sound and right. (4)

Power is basically a matter of superior personal qualities, status or command of physical force—it is conceived in terms of one-way influence or domination by one person or group over some other person or group.

Most Americans, confidently aware of the values of democracy and of science, reject as false the beliefs outlined in the preceding paragraph. Most of us would grant that propagation of such false ideas, whether in schools or out, is mis-education. And if our reasoning is sound, if the use of methods of coercion and compromise in dealing with inescapable controversies and conflicts reinforces and stabilizes these false beliefs as well as their methodological correlates, most of us would grant that we should search wholeheartedly for a different methodology for dealing with controversy and conflict and try wholeheartedly to learn its use both in school and out.

#### METHODOLOGY OF CONSENSUS

The search must be for a methodology which squares with the following alternative platform of assumptions:

(1) Men of all groups, including other groups than "my own," are unique centers of thought and valuation and are potential contributors to my learning, as I am to theirs.

(2) Human interests, attitudes and ideologies are learned and can be unlearned or reconstructed in learning—intergroup collaboration and communication are necessary conditions of reconstructing attitudes that are group reinforced.

(3) The quest for dependable meanings concerning a plurality of means and ends is at once man's most

characteristic and hopeful activity; to assume that one knows the final truth or good is to put an end to this activity.

(4) Power is best conceived as centering in effective human control over things and means through which things may be made to yield human satisfactions. The widening of power through the growth among men of common understandings, skills and controls in managing their environment is a good to be sought. "Power" which obstructs this widening is "power" to be restricted and re-educated.

On the basis of these assumptions, how do we look at social controversy and the educative methodology appropriate for dealing with it? First of all, we must accept conflict and controversy as the "givens" which they have become in our culture and face them as such. Moreover, we must see controversy as the occasion for creating new goods, new meanings, new learnings not available otherwise. For, where men think and feel and value in the same way, one has nothing to learn from the other. Where men differ, each may learn from an experience different from his own.

To realize the educative values potential in social controversy men need not only to learn the convictions and attitudes already noted. They need also to learn the disciplines which give operational meaning to the methodology appropriate to these convictions and attitudes, the methodology of consensus. We can no more characterize the details of this methodology here than we have been able to do previously with the methodologies of coercion and com-

promise.<sup>2</sup> Briefly, the methodology must be focused upon the collaborative management of processes of choice and decision when confusion and conflict exist as to the best course to take. It must involve ways of objectifying and criticizing value standards and ideals as well as factual information and descriptive generalizations about the factual state of affairs. It must rescue conceptions of "what ought to be" from the realm of private wish and dream and find ways of using these as raw materials for constructing commonly felt, criticized and accepted visions of "what ought to be" through responsible public deliberation. It must find ways of bridging the gap of non-communication between the different departments of specialized knowledge and between knowledge and values and of bringing relevant resources of considered value and fact to bear upon the resolution of the controversies and conflicts among men and groups of men. An uncoerced community of outlook and commitment must become the goal of discussion, study and deliberation and the measure of the effectiveness of these processes as they are employed.

The discipline required for effective participation in the educative use of controversy must thus draw from the skills and the insights of science, of art

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<sup>2</sup> See Raup, Benne, Smith and Axtelle, *The Improvement of Practical Intelligence*; Otto, Max, *The Human Enterprise*, especially Ch. V; Follett, Mary P., *Creative Experience*; and Hullfish, H. Gordon, "Philosophy and the Democratic Aspiration," *Educational Forum*, Nov. 1949, pp. 75-87, for a development of some of the aspects of the required methodology. While the agreement among these various authors is by no means complete, all are united in their search for the methodological requirements of an educative use of controversy and conflict.

and of ethics. The discipline will be acquired by men of whatever age only as they seek to deal with social controversy as an educational opportunity. The first task of educators is to gain clarity as to the broad outlines of the required discipline, and its supporting attitudes and convictions, for themselves and to practice it in resolving issues of professional policy and plan. A second and frequently neglected task, if any major part of the school learning of children and young people is to be

focused upon the creative resolution of conflict, is to help adults of the community in using and appreciating the method of consensus in dealing with conflict and controversy, as these arise both in their own organizations and in intergroup relations. Only as adults are helped to overcome their fear of conflict and to gain confident discipline in using controversy educatively will they support wholehearted efforts in schools to develop a comparable discipline in their children.

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