

# Core Classes Study Race Relations

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Two core classes study race relations, with results described by J. O. Hamner, principal, and Opal Cooper and Robert Stewart, teachers, in the Fairview Public Schools, Cullman, Alabama.

OUR school is located in North Alabama in the foothills of the Appalachians. Land in this area was formerly well timbered and has never lent itself to the big plantation farming which is typical of much of the South.

The earliest settlers staked their claims to small tracts of woodland near springs and along creeks. They farmed very small fields which they cleared along these streams. After the Civil War, people who had lost their homes and slaves, and those people who had never owned slaves began coming in droves to make homestead on the public land. A few years later German emigrants came, settling in and about the nearest town.

Our school is about ten miles from this town and serves an area in which only white people have ever lived. It is a consolidated school with an enrollment of about 850 students and a faculty of 26 teachers, including the principal.

## Community Problems Studied

For a number of years the school has had a flexible program, which enables any teacher who desires to do so to try *core* teaching in his classes. The first attempts at *core* work included only the more evident problems of the community whose reasonable solution seemed feasible within the school term.

About ten years ago one teacher of senior high students introduced a unit on *The Negro*. At that time only one Negro, a cook for a near-by family, lived anywhere near the school. Only a few of the students, coming in from other communities, had lived where there were Negro tenant farmers.

In a previous unit this class had made a survey of the county's economic status. Data about the county's only Negro community, on the opposite side of the county, had aroused the interest of the students. This led to a study of slavery in the South and questions inevitably began to arise concerning the place of the Negro in our society.

Perhaps the most rewarding part of the study was a trip made by some members of the group to the one Negro school in the county. Reading of books, pamphlets and magazine articles led to many questions and much discussion, but the actual visit and the conversation with students and teachers in the Negro school proved of greatest value to the group. The trip included an interview with an ex-slave. He discussed with the students his former owner, the coming of his freedom, and his feeling about each phase of his life.

This trip led to many debates within the whole class. Final activity was an assembly program. The entire school shared in the summary. A decided

change in attitude toward the Negro seemed to be evident on the part of many of the students.

During and after World War II, our student population changed rapidly. We found in our state and community in 1946 and 1947 bitter opposition by many to enactment of a Civil Rights Bill.

A group of juniors, in their study of American democracy, decided to concentrate on *Leading Problems of the South*. In such a unit naturally the problem of *Race Relations* appeared near the top of the list. Other topics chosen were, *Conservation of Our Resources*, *Labor Unions* and *Education*.

But the most controversial topic of all was that of *Race Relations*. Student opinion, which represented almost wholly parent opinion, varied from one extreme to the other. The junior class, nevertheless, decided to find out what others had to say on both sides of this question. Our rooms by this time had been equipped with tables and chairs so that we could work in committees and come together in a group for purposes of sharing.

### Search for Unbiased Materials

In the course of this unit the teacher began a wide search for usable and unbiased material. Students in the committee on *Race Relations* divided their topic into the following sub-topics: history of the Negro; contribution of the Negro to society and the war effort; biological differences among races; and rights and privileges which are often denied the Negro.

Their material was scarce, but *Survey Graphic* for January 1947 and *Biology and Human Affairs* by John W.

Ritchie, along with articles in various periodicals gave the students a basis for exploration of the subject.

When the full group came together for sharing, discussions grew heated. Often the teacher had to serve as referee and to insist that opinions be based upon facts. The students literally wore to shreds the copy of *Survey Graphic*, for each one could find in it material on his particular topic. Segregation, laws pertaining to the Negro, outstanding contributions of the Negro, physiological differences and likenesses were all discussed in this issue.

The two students who studied biological differences among races were astounded to find that both Negro and white blood are classified in the same four major types, "A," "B," "AB" and "O." These students decided to make a chart showing this and using as a title Acts 17:26, "And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth." This chart, when displayed, drew fire from some members of the group. But the scientific evidence carried conviction and the arguments of these pupils gradually lessened in vehemence.

In their final reports, members of the committee on *Race Relations* displayed their chart, presented their facts with all their supporting references, and read some poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar and "The Creation" from James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones*. Contributions of G. W. Carver, B. T. Washington, Joe Louis and some others were given in detail. Members of other committees listened with respect and some signs of a general change in attitude among most of the students seemed to be evident. Everyone agreed that he

understood better the history of the Negro and his contributions and his aspirations.

Headway had been made on the problem of race relations, but no final solution had been achieved. The issue arose again as the result of a pupil's raising the question, in connection with a report on the life of G. W. Carver, "What good, except in a few cases like Carver, has the Negro ever done in America?"

The teacher realized that the class had touched upon a live subject and he made the most of this opportunity. The class had only a few members who openly expressed prejudice against the Negro race but some of these voiced their opinions bitterly. Their biased viewpoint had come largely through family tradition which tended toward developing a closed mind on certain topics. Many of the class members had never been closely associated with any Negroes and consequently they would not permit any good ideas about the Negro to enter their minds.

During the course of the unit, the "Jim Crow" issue in public transportation was raised. Several of the more liberal students immediately condemned this practice as unfair and dishonest. It was at this point in the unit that the question of democratic values and of the fundamental idea of the "brotherhood of man" began to enter the overall picture before the class.

Several of the group members voiced the idea that if students from the only Negro school in the county could be invited to visit our school, we might be making a first step toward understanding of the problem of race relations. Almost immediately plans were drawn up, presented to our principal and ap-

proved by him. At the beginning, county school officials hesitated; however, they soon realized that such steps might well serve to improve racial relations. They were helpful in carrying through our plans for the visit.

### **School Visit Brings Mutual Benefit**

During the visit which followed, the Negro and the white children with their teachers and school principals sat in a group and discussed their common problems. No one tried to build up one race against any other, but each individual simply placed before the group his problems as they are affected by race conditions as they exist in our land today. Then each individual tried to see whether one side balanced the other. Needless to say, the scales would not balance and the principle of the "brotherhood of man" seemed more than ever an unrealistic dream rather than a practical reality of everyday living.

Our visitors next presented a chapel program before the entire high school. Points made in the previous group discussion, and the excellent chapel presentation, made a deep impression upon many of our students. The material they had read in *America's Tenth Man*, *Understanding our Neighbors* and *Brawley's A Short History of the American Negro* now had become concrete and real to them. The injustice of discrimination was recognized by members of the group and they began to think in terms of "equality of opportunity."

At the end of the unit one student stated, "My prejudice toward the Negro was due to ignorance. This study has opened my eyes." Perhaps the general attitude of the whole class could be summed up in the written reaction of

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."

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