

# *Children Must Live Through Their Controversies*

JOHN A. RAMSEYER

How the school can help children deal more intelligently with controversial issues is discussed in this article by John A. Ramseyer, director, The University School, Ohio State University, Columbus.

PERSONAL integrity coupled with a useful and secure vocational life are two of the most common goals which parents seek for their children. If put to the test of a choice between these goals, most parents, in spite of a tremendous desire for economic security for their children, would hold above all else the virtues of life associated with their concepts of personal integrity.

The teacher who is concerned with the development of the total personality of the child would do well to explore this concept with the parents of children in his classroom. The meanings of personal integrity are numerous and varied. Their range represents the field within which the teacher needs to work as he tries to enhance the child's conceptual view of his own worth and role in our adult society.

For the most part, the picture in this respect is a confused one. In many instances adults hope that children may grow up with a loyalty to them and to a worth-while cause. Yet, at the same time, children should not be blind followers either of their leaders or of a particular cause as it is defined by adults. Children are to be taught to obey and also to question. They are to be taught to cooperate but also to realize to the full their own personal po-

tentialities. In our country they are to be taught the meaning of democracy, though some of this meaning may seem to them at times confusing and contradictory. They are to be taught to hold individual values and beliefs and, at the same time, to tolerate and live graciously with others who may hold opposed beliefs and values.

It is in such a matrix of beliefs and opinions that these youngsters live, feel, believe and value for themselves. To wish that children might be spared the responsibility of facing issues in their daily living while they accumulate skill in reading, writing and arithmetic or while they store up the knowledge needed to face these issues is a vain hope. The plain fact is that children observe, are sensitive to, and at all age levels have formulated beliefs about the social issues which are so confusing.

## **Children Observe and Question**

Listening to children of kindergarten and primary grade levels, one can easily discern that children are keen observers of their social surroundings. Usually both parents and teachers are amazed and pleased when the alert and curious child asks, "What makes it snow?" or "Why don't the stars fall down?" or "What makes the car go?"

However, adults are sometimes made uneasy when children's questions and observations fall in such an area as that of the biological sciences. For example, some kindergarten children who were taking care of their guinea pigs commented that one of the animals was going to have babies. A little girl informed us that "you shouldn't pick up the mother very much when its babies are expected. You might hurt it." Another child added that "the daddy had to be put in another cage." Still another child wondered if "guinea pigs had to have daddies just like children do?" A fourth child told that when her mother was pregnant she and daddy had to do dishes so mother could rest. Someone asked, "What does pregnant mean?"

Was the conversation intelligent? Should children be permitted to talk about such things? When children observe these natural life changes should their interests be diverted into other channels, or should they be given simple satisfying answers? These and many other questions are put to the teacher when it is discovered that children are aware of sex differences and of the fact that for life to go on there are natural processes of reproduction.

On another occasion a child of primary school age took his Negro friend to the neighborhood theater. As they left the movie together the theater manager called the white boy aside and asked him not to bring his friend back again. At home the white boy explained to his parents that, although many children had misbehaved in the movie, Jackie, the Negro boy, had not been one of these. The white boy then asked his parents, "Why did the theater man say that I shouldn't bring Jackie back

again?" Can the answer make sense to one too young to have acquired the same prejudices?

Just a few days ago a youngster not yet eight years of age told his teacher that some Chinese children live in his neighborhood and that "they must be Communists, too." The child then asked, "Chinese are bad people, aren't they?" Out of what maze of experience could the child's thinking have made him arrive at such a generalization? Could this be attributed to conversations with children in the neighborhood, to radio and television programs, comments of adults or the child's experiences with Chinese people, or could it be a figment of his imagination?

"It's all right to kill people if it's in war." "My brother went to war in Korea but he won't get killed because we asked God not to let him get killed." "We ought to use the A-bomb on the Communists, I hate 'em!" These are just a few observations and impressions which children currently have about war, the international situation today, and a faith in God.

#### CHILDREN ARE KEENLY AWARE OF SOCIAL PHENOMENA

Those who have worked with children for any considerable length of time know what variation there may be in their conceptions of private ownership, personal possession and the principle of sharing. Too often, it is not recognized by adults that these, too, are values that have been learned rather than mere differences in the amount of innate selfishness among children.

Perhaps it is unnecessary to illustrate further the fact that children are as observing of social phenomena as they are

of their physical surroundings. There is considerable evidence to support the thesis that children have social understandings which are just as concrete to them as the material objects which surround them.<sup>1</sup> To go even further, it appears fairly certain that at very early ages children are not only aware of or observe social change, but they have formed impressions of their own. In fact, it would seem that definite prejudices and hostilities are already formed about such change.<sup>2</sup> The keenness with which rejection can be felt by children is illustrated by this anecdote:

The children had written a play, "A Pioneer Christmas." They were choosing children to take the parts of different characters in the play. Some suggested that Bruce, a Negro child with a good singing voice, be the circuit rider and that Mary, another Negro, be his wife. This met with the approval of everyone in the class.

The choice of other characters went along without mishap until it came to the selection of children for the family. Both Negro and white children were nominated. The Negro candidates finally eliminated themselves as choices by accepting other roles. Jimmy, who was the first choice for the child in the family, when asked to act that part, remarked, "I don't think that would work."

Immediately it was apparent that Mary suspected Jimmy of prejudice.

She remarked, "I don't see why not. We're just as good as you, Jimmy, only our skins are different." The spontaneity, ease and feeling of good will that had characterized the discussion up to this point seemed to be lost by several sharply pointed comments which followed.

Soon, however, it was discovered, through Jimmy's own explanation, that he had simply "tried to be funny," without realizing that his remark might be misunderstood. Mary, who had been quick to suspect, just as quickly asked Jimmy's forgiveness. A brief discussion about how people often hurt one another without cause left this class of fourth-graders with deeper insight into the problem of race relations.

### Social Conditions Affect Children, Too

If controversial issues were entirely the concern of adults there might be some reason why children should not deal with these issues. However, this alternative is eliminated by the very fact that the lives of children, too, are affected by the social conditions which surround them. Evading issues and failing to think through our real dilemmas are aspects of behavior which greatly damage personality whether it be of child, youth or adult. The only way to learn to meet straightforwardly the problems of life is to meet them day by day. Children feel cheated when adults fail to answer their questions. If this practice continues for long, children become suspicious that adults are not quite honest with themselves. They may even suspect that adults prefer evasion over penetrating inquiry into matters that make a difference. We not only

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of The University School, *How Children Develop*, Ohio State University, 1949.

<sup>2</sup> Marian Radke, Helen G. Trager and Hadasah Davis, "Social Perceptions and Attitudes of Children." *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, 1949.

learn by doing but we learn what we do.

The real concern of this argument, then, is not "should we deal with controversial issues in the elementary school?" Children *are* dealing with them. The point is, "How can we help children deal with them more intelligently?"

First, it seems to me, the treatment given such issues depends very much upon the level of thinking and understanding in which the concerns of children arise. Many questions by children are for information only. Even though such queries may fall in the realm of social relationships, the child may be innocent of the adult meanings which may be read into his questions. Questions about the birth of babies are often merely for information. Young children are soon aware of enlargement of the mother due to pregnancy. To be told simply that mother is carrying a new baby brother or sister is satisfying, although it may not stop the questioning. Most parents, perhaps because they have had no previous training in being parents, fail to meet these questions with simple and satisfying answers. They learn to become parents by practicing on their children.

### **Satisfying Answers Are Needed**

Hence the elementary teacher must be aware of the kinds of questions children are likely to ask. He must learn how to provide a setting in which these questions come easily. He must provide simple answers and, at the same time, leave the impression that when the children wish more complete answers he has ready information in the form of books, films, models and real living

situations. The teacher must assist parents in anticipating questions of concern to children. He must help parents understand the very real nature of their children's problems and how the school and home can work together in a co-operative program of guidance.

Concerns of children which are apparent from attitudes, prejudices and fixed values or beliefs exhibited in a child's behavior require treatment different from concerns of mere awareness and curiosity. Often the child confuses beliefs with facts. How can the child be helped to understand that he has acted upon judgments which he derived only from the information available to him rather than upon the complete facts of the case? Moreover, how can the child be helped to understand that on many issues he has no alternative except to act on judgments which he formulates from data available to him?

Often the child must act without having all of the data pertinent to the situation. Hence, each of us goes through life making judgments and acting upon them even though much data pertinent to these decisions may not be known to us at the time they must be made. The teacher has not completed his task until the child realizes that this is the nature of judging, believing and valuing. Our learning is never complete. To be honest with themselves and those with whom they deal, people must continue to seek better data and continue to revise value judgments in terms of these findings.

The difficulty in this learning situation is not merely the analysis of the child's judgments, the supplying of new data and the bringing of the child to the realization that new facts require a



*Courtesy, Ohio State University*

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remaking of meanings. Rather, the difficulty lies in the fact that by the time the child has learned to make judgments he has learned also that, regardless of the facts, pressures are at work to maintain certain positions no matter how ill-founded these positions may be. To put it simply, the child has learned that sometimes people do not want to look at the facts. Herein lies the greatest controversy which he has to face. How to behave when values and beliefs dictate one course of action but when it is politic to act differently, is a problem which many children face over and over again before they leave high school.

### **We Must Learn to Live Responsibly**

Our problem is a moral one. Unless we help children to live through their issues responsibly we repudiate the trust which we accepted when the

school assumed its share in the task of enhancing the complete personalities of its pupils. In accepting this responsibility, school people must remember that the child's total life reflects many influences other than that of the school. To treat these broader influences as though they were school problems or classroom assignments to be learned would be to miss the point completely.

The school that deals adequately with the issues of life reflected in the day-by-day living of children must center its treatment in a broad community context out of which the issues arise. The teachers must realize that children live—feel, believe, react to, emotionalize, rationalize—the social conditions which surround them. The teachers must have time provided in which to study the nature of children's observations and the extent to which these observations affect the social po-

sitions which they take. The curriculum must take these matters into account by giving the teacher an opportunity to develop with children a program of learning experiences which will deal with their real concerns. The teacher in such a situation will need to make many judgments of his own. He will want to check his judgments with fellow teachers, parents and leaders of children and youth groups in the community.

In such a school classes will become social groups that are dealing with matters of real concern to those involved. The beliefs, values, fears, prejudices, opinions of those who make up the child's community come with him as he works with his classmates in coming to conclusions about matters of concern to the group. The learning material may come from a wide variety of sources. Children will be taking trips to observe various aspects of community life. They will be reviewing films, listening to recordings, conducting simple experiments, surveying opinions, discussing the foundations for opinions, as well as reading books, newspapers and magazines. The classroom will lend itself to the exploration and development

of ideas gained from many sources rather than to the mere repetition of facts without regard to their effect upon the minds which seek them. Such a school will be fortunate in having a selective supply of literature in the field of human and social relations for children throughout the range of the elementary and the secondary school.<sup>3</sup>

The school that deals adequately with issues that are controversial must work closely with parents. Parent meetings at each grade level are needed in order that parents and teachers may check the effect of the efforts of school, home and community agencies upon the breadth and depth of social insights which pupils are gaining. Such a school and its parent groups do not leave the teaching of skills to the school and reserve the personal and social beliefs and attitudes to the home and church. In these schools the parents and teachers realize that only through a frank give-and-take of opinions and judgments can the efforts of both be integrated into a consistent pattern of teaching both in home and school.

<sup>3</sup> See list prepared by staff of Intergroup Education in Cooperating Schools, American Council On Education.

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