

What Schools Can Do To Improve Social Attitudes

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As schools share in the search for peace, what approaches do they use in the changing of social attitudes? A. R. Mead, dean of instruction, Athens College, Athens, Alabama, outlines some of these practices.

THE SOCIETY in which we live today is beset with a plethora of critical problems, most of which are in human behavior, and most of which are caused by attitudes of our people. From the writings of Droba, Remmers, Cantril, Allport, the following characterizations of attitudes are obtained.

An attitude is a mental disposition of a human being to act for or against a definite object. The predominant factor in attitudes is a felt disposition to act in a certain way, and that way is more or less understood by the actor. Attitudes not only drive one to action, they give the action direction. Remmers describes attitudes as important determiners of individual and collective aspirations, hopes and ideals. Cantril says they are general in character. Because attitudes include feelings or emotional tone with driving power, the human organism uses the autonomic nervous system and related glands to assist, correct, adjust the organism in cases of attitudes and action. However, teachers can deal with but three groups of elements in the total complex of attitudes. They are: ideas, understandings; feelings, or feeling tone or emotional drive; and action. One more feature of attitudes is of importance. They seem to occur in our lives in opposing pairs, such as love and hate,

fear and courage; and the person exhibits the attitude in varying degree from the undesirable (hate) to the desirable (love).

Attitudes Are Important

The importance of attitudes is shown by the facts that they are basic to most social tensions, to war, to mob action, to persecutions, to fanatical action, to great achievements in any life area, to the finer spiritual parts of our life, to the making of fine homes, schools, good and effective economic life, active cooperating communities, regional cooperation, international movements, etc. Schools, therefore, must increase their services by great advances in the improvement of social attitudes.

Changing of attitudes is achieved by many agencies in many ways. E. R. Clinchy and others urge a community social clinic which will be ready to appraise any tension spot, mobilize the resources and secure constructive action rather than the opposite. Churches sometimes unite as did the Presbyterian minister and the Jewish rabbi in New York City. In many communities local councils or committees exist to work in special areas such as interracial matters, inter-faith work, etc. In some cases, these have proved very effective in changing attitudes for the better.

The motion picture study directed by Charters made clear the great force of such a medium of communication in changing attitudes, and the use of the radio is well known to all of us. At times, the theater contributes much to improved attitudes, but often does little more than entertain. In the South, the Southern Regional Council and the Fellowship of the Concerned, both with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, are excellent examples of regional agencies changing attitudes in critical tensions. Among national agencies, we may mention the work of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the American Friends Service Committee, labor unions, patriotic societies, and the numerous publicity agencies that operate to change our attitudes and behavior. In this matter, we must reckon also with the radical leader who is sometimes a fanatic. The home, school and church, if they work together, sometimes can make a trinity of great force.

We are most concerned, however, with what the schools can do in this area. They must work in terms of the known operational factors that change attitudes. Practices that fail to do this are likely to be weak in their contributions to the betterment of attitudes.

PRACTICES FOR CHANGING SOCIAL ATTITUDES

Following is a list of representative teaching practices in the changing of social attitudes today. One of these practices will be described and critically evaluated in terms of necessary operational factors.

- The textbook and the material it contains, united with other experiences,

sometimes provide a group of factors which promote attitudes.

- Unit teaching may be a very productive practice for growth of attitudes. A fine example of this is the book, *Focus on Human Relations*. It is true also that units of teaching experiences may result in little more than ideas.
- Cooperative planning has proved to be a potential medium of improvement of attitudes. The groups may be the children, or teachers, or teachers and administrators, or the school staff and community personnel.
- The practice of democracy in school and community places great emphasis on the growth of desirable attitudes.
- The out-of-class activities of the school such as conduct in halls, on the playground, the child's use of school plant and other facilities, and his growth in improved use become potential positive factors.
- The total school community program is another group of factors highly productive of valuable attitudes in our society.
- The so-called "contributions" approach helps children to obtain improved understandings of many conditions basic to attitude growth; it does not emphasize, however, other factors in attitudes. This consists in the study of the contributions made by minority groups, or any other group with which the instruction is concerned.
- The use of precepts is an old practice that helped in gaining ideas—but little else. The achieved understanding was very limited in scope.
- The study of ideals of life vs. the actual practice of life, such as the study of the nature of the Golden Rule vs. the effects of unrestricted exploitation

of persons of lower economic status. This provides the basis for improved understanding, but may not contribute to the drives to action.

- The study of the nature of man as anthropology describes him, is a basis for examination of such claims as that of superiority of race or nationality, etc. This helps to improve understanding, but is not likely to stimulate action.

- Use of surveys to ascertain what is happening socially in a given area or population group. This, again, provides facts, ideas, but may not contribute much otherwise.

- The child development approach or the study of desirable and undesirable conditions of child growth. This causes the learner to face many facts which are opposed to popular prejudices, and may be a strong ally in improvement of attitudes.

- Vicarious experiences, such as sociodrama provide facts and feeling tone, which are helpful factors in growth of fine attitudes

- A school may engage in actual orientation of a minority group or a family or representative of a minority group. This provides firsthand facts, actual behavior and, under appropriate conditions can become potent in changing attitudes.

- Re-grouping of children in terms of socialization may, if handled tactfully, be helpful. It helps, then to build new friendships.

- Planned, voluntary personal associations or working together can provide facts, and can be a most powerful factor in the improvement of attitudes. It must be done with wisdom and careful planning.

- Counseling and guidance may be very helpful. The writer knows a minister much skilled in using this way to improve family life attitudes.

- "Shock" under some conditions may help but its use, like the use of a drug, must be made with great skill, or serious damage may result.

- Many forms of penalties and rewards are used in schools for the same purpose. These are ancient practices. Even though they are based on the Law of Effect and much research has been made on such problems, the use of penalties and rewards is often crudely done and the results may be attitudes of undesirable anti-social character.

- Perhaps most schools make their contribution to development of attitudes as concomitants of learning experiences designed for other purposes, and through life of the school not centered in study of subject matter. This approach leaves much to be desired. It can exist in a school quite isolated from the life problems of the community and thus fail to recognize them.

THE VICARIOUS EXPERIENCE APPROACH

The "vicarious experiences" approach places the learner in a situation that is fictitious but similar to a real action situation, and gives him an opportunity to see himself in the roles of others, whether these roles are pleasant or unpleasant. Examples of this are skits, plays, movies, sociodrama and the more usual experience of interesting reading, auditorium or radio performances. Through a skit, play or sociodrama, children prepare and act the roles of persons of other groups. A white girl plays the role of a Negro girl who cannot find a place to eat or

sleep in a community with racial discriminations. A white boy plays the role of a Negro college graduate who, though prepared for a profession, finds himself compelled to do menial service in the kitchen of a restaurant. A Protestant acts the role of a Catholic or a Jew or vice versa.

The Detroit evaluation indicates that it combines facts and ideas with emotional motivation; emphasizes common features, likenesses of all peoples; and provides representatives of a majority group a means of learning of some of the problems of members of minority groups. Drawbacks are: scarcity of suitable materials, lack of time to prepare such materials; and unsuitability of such materials as now exist. Detroit mentions movies such as "Black Legion" and "Captains Courageous" as quite suitable.¹ This approach makes a definite attempt to unite the factors necessary for development of desirable social attitudes among people who differ as to race, creed, etc. As such, it goes far beyond the traditional "study and recite" work of schools.

SOME CONCEPTIONS BASIC TO CHANGING ATTITUDES

The guiding principles, or conceptions, basic to changing attitudes are, in the main, those which make effective learning and growth possible, but which place emphasis on the combinations of factors involved, i.e., combinations of ideas, feelings and action. Some of these conceptions are:

- The teaching-learning situation should provide experiences which involve meanings (understandings, ideas),

¹ See Detroit Public Schools. *Promising Practices in Intergroup Education*, Board of Education, city of Detroit, 1917, p. 27-29.

feelings (emotions, likes, dislikes, etc.), and action.

- The Law of Effect is important in changing or in the developing of new attitudes. One's satisfactions (likes, joys, appreciations, etc.) and one's annoyances (hates, dislikes, etc.) play important roles. This principle is basic to "punishments," disapprovals, ostracism, and to "rewards," social approval, acceptance, etc. used by parents, teachers and others.

- Re-experiencing is important in order to provide opportunity for development of desirable attitudes, but will also make possible opportunity for development of undesirable attitudes. Re-experiencing that is mere routine repetition is not very likely to prove of much value.

- Instruction must begin at the level of the child's present status and proceed gradually to a level of higher social-ethical quality. Such change as may come is likely to be slow, although "shock" may provide unusually strong drive or motive.

- Schools will find it profitable to have unity of belief in the work of changing attitudes, as well as considerable unity in the understanding of the nature of attitudes, and of how attitudes are changed.

SEVERAL HELPFUL REFERENCES

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