Editorial

Human Relations: Neighborhood, Nation, World

THOUGHTFUL educators and other community workers have come increasingly to realize the crucial role which education for democratic human relations must play in our world of today and tomorrow. They are increasingly recognizing that our culture’s most pressing problems stem from our failure to fully utilize our human and natural resources rather than from the absence of such resources. In our families, in our communities, on the job, as well as in national and international affairs, serious social conflicts arise which prevent us from effectively living and working together. Recognition of the importance of such conflicts is by no means new, however. Educators, religious leaders and representatives of social agencies devoted to the improvement of our social order have long pronounced the need for intergroup education. Exhortation regarding the case for school and other institutional programs centered upon fostering more democratic human relations has become common. Appeals in the form of “It is our duty as citizens . . .,” “We should be ashamed . . .,” or more sophisticated interpretations, have been heard frequently in the past decade. Institutions have spent vast sums of money on conferences and institutes devoted to announcing the need for intergroup education.

While it is certainly true that many people in America do not yet see the need for educational programs concerned with promoting better relationships between persons and groups in our society, it is also apparent that these appeals have not been as effective as we might hope. Too frequently the case for human relations education is made year after year to the same group—people who were convinced long ago of the need. Rather than developing a program for extending the leadership competence of those whom we know are already committed to intergroup education as an important center of experience, we tend simply to repeat to them the case for such. As with many college curricula, all of the “courses” are introductory ones—we so seldom build upon the things people already know or believe.

Our Association, committed as it is to the development of effective, democratic educational leadership, would do well to examine this objective in the context of human relations education, for it would seem there are many lessons to be learned.

One serious consequence of this tendency to stay always with the “ABC’s” of a program has been the failure to adequately train leadership personnel to build and carry out effective school and community programs of intergroup understanding. Too often able, committed individuals wanting to do something have not had the opportunity for training in the field beyond the general, introductory stage. With this lack of real training has come the quite natural tendency to look either for simple answers to complex questions or to judge the situation to be so complex as to defy solution short of full-scale societal changes. And so we have those who would explain all of the social conflicts in the world in terms of unfortunate toilet-training expe-
riences of the young. At the opposite extreme are those who would dismiss such homely but real factors as incidental and hold, in the depths of frustration and disillusionment, that any improvement of human relationships must wait upon a complete reconstruction of the world social structure. Both errors are serious ones, particularly when they fail to see other alternatives beyond these two.

When will we come to the recognition that it is not necessary to choose between home experiences in early childhood and broad, pervasive social-economic forces at work in our culture in order to explain the development of attitudes toward other persons and groups? When will we see that the individual and the culture are constantly interactive and that the broad, impersonal, world-wide social forces ultimately leave their mark upon individual behavior just as fully as do those of an immediate, personal, localized nature?

The tendency to think, in song title fashion, that “It’s Gotta Be This or That” places us out on many a precarious professional limb as we seek to explain the formation of attitudes. With the many pressures for specialization of function in our modern industrial world, has come the tendency for many of us to carve out of one large and complex problem but one tiny chip and seek to explain the entirety from the vantage point of one discipline or one limited set of experiences. Fortunately a number of inroads upon this type of academic provincialism are now being made by schools and colleges across the nation. ASCD has already made clear its endorsement of such programs. But there is much more yet to be done. A recent report appearing in the New York Times on research now being carried on by colleges and universities is not encouraging. This report shows how little research of any kind, atomistic or interdisciplinary, is at present being conducted in the social sciences and humanities by our institutions of higher learning. If we take seriously the position that human relations problems are of central importance to our contemporary culture, there is just cause for alarm in noting that only about 10% of all research reported by a sampling of such institutions falls into the categories of social science or humanities.

Some extremely significant theories and research on attitude formation have nonetheless developed in recent years. It is important that the implications of these be explored more fully and that additional investigations in a wide variety of school and community situations be conducted.

The frustration-aggression hypothesis has been familiar to most educators for some time as an explanation for certain types of behavior. However, our frequent failure to go beyond the surface in training leadership in the human relations field has resulted in programs for improving human relations which have neglected the “escape valve” operation of aggression. Programs designed solely to extol the virtues and contributions of certain minority groups, so as to eliminate discrimination against them, serve at best to re-channel the basic feelings of frustration into aggressions against some other person or group, or perhaps against self. If we see aggression as an important form of personal need satisfaction we must recognize that until we reduce the factors arousing feelings of frustration in the individual we will only be plugging one hole in the dike to find another leakage of hostility somewhere else in the total social structure.
Another concept developed by recent research which needs to be brought more fully into the thinking of human relations workers is the existence of what the authors of one volume in the Harper's Studies in Prejudice series term "authoritarian personalities." The studies on which their book was based found that prejudice and hostility toward others tend to be associated with a personality pattern characterized by extreme rigidity, conventionality, repressive denial, fear and dependency. If there is validity in such findings it would seem that we would need increasingly to see family, industrial, national and world conflicts in the context of these behavior syndromes. Rather than simply asking how we can get husbands to be nicer to their wives, bosses to their employees, majority groups to minority groups—as if the answers lay within the confines of these relationships alone—we might increasingly ask "how can we help to build democratic rather than authoritarian personalities?" Such a question would have profound implications for parents and teachers working with pre-school children in the home or in small groups. It would similarly have great implications for those working at the level of labor-management relations, housing development, foreign policy, and so on. Perhaps it would reduce our tendency to rely on the introduction of a "short course on getting along with someone" to solve problems of relationships developed in an environment whose major pressures tend toward the development of fearful and confused people.

Another insight into the causes of prejudiced behavior suggests that such persons have simply never grown up emotionally. Along with larger feet, a deepening voice and the necessity for shaving—all part of the physical maturation of boys—should come an emotional maturation which enables the adult male to place himself in the role of others and feel the consequences of his behavior as others feel it. Many of us have witnessed what seemed like very cruel behavior on the part of one four-year-old toward another. Knowing children, however, we quickly realized that this was not indicative of innate or deliberate cruelty but rather of immaturity, for the one child never fully realized how his actions made the other feel. We expect adults to perceive these relationships—and yet, unfortunately, many never do. Perhaps they do not because too many of those responsible for their development have acted as if maturity was a mechanism which unwinds itself automatically and becomes fully operative without any deliberate stimulation by parents and teachers.

These are but a few of the promising leads into a fuller understanding of human behavior which need to be explored and acted upon. Those we have mentioned tend to substantiate the relationship implied by Stuart Chase in Roads to Agreement when he described a "skyscraper of conflict" with "... a fight on every door." Each of the facets of conflict which we encounter in our world of today impinges upon other facets. All seem to be linked together in one way or another. Perhaps more than anything else, those who would build democratic human relations in neighborhood, nation or world must see and incorporate in their actions this sensitivity to the interrelatedness of such problems.—George W. Denemark, executive secretary, ASCD and editor, Educational Leadership.