

A Class Studies Prejudice

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Ninth grade pupils in a Denver junior high school make a systematic study of culture patterns of their state and of the effects of inequalities of opportunity. As a result they found their feelings toward others had changed.

THE CLASS consisted of a group of forty-three ninth grade pupils, well adjusted, though representing a wide range of ability. I had been with them as their sponsor and English and social science teacher ever since they had come to junior high two years before.

The school is in one of the better districts of Denver where the homes of professional and business people range from modest, well-kept ones to fine new houses. These people, with few exceptions, are ambitious for their children to succeed scholastically and socially. The children themselves are content to move in their own little circles, having little or no contact with others outside of those circles. In fact, a consultant from the Intergroup Relations Center at the University of Chicago summed up the whole situation as "smug" and bound both inside and outside of school by traditions. The need, she felt, was for the children to acquire an understanding of different peoples and how they live and to broaden their concepts about existing conditions in their own city.

To create this better understanding of peoples of our country, a colleague and I went to the University of Chi-

ago in the summer of 1947 to work on problems of Intergroup Relations, using local history as a basis for our study. Under the able direction of Hilda Taba and Margaret Heaton we developed two units of the theme, "Culture Patterns of the People of Colorado." The plan was to integrate social science and English in one general structure by beginning with central concepts and arranging activities in psychological sequence to develop these concepts. The activities were to begin with experiences familiar to the pupils and then lead to further facts and knowledge. At the same time sensitizing stories were to be read to arouse emotional responses in the reader. The two units developed under this plan were entitled, "Culture Pattern of the People of Colorado" and "Inequalities of Opportunities Existing Among the People of Denver."

A Study of Culture Patterns

To launch the first unit was not an easy task. It was a distinct departure from the traditional ninth grade courses of social science and English. No textbook was to be used. Much depended upon the teacher. After the strenuous efforts of the summer, I was eager to begin, especially upon the sensitizing stories to promote emotional response.

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In my eagerness I was overconfident about the acceptance of this new plan by the pupils. Their interest developed slowly. They were not sure in what direction they were heading, even after the scope of the year's work was explained to them.

After working with them for two weeks on experiences closely associated with themselves—the reasons for their forefathers' coming to Colorado, stories of early Colorado obtained from interviews with neighbors and friends—I introduced the first sensitizing activity. It was the reading together of the "New Citizen" by Francis Dwyer found in *This Interlocking World*. It is a story of two Slavic peasants, Ivan and Anna, who had come to America after years of saving because of a dream they had, a dream of freedom in America.

At the opening of the story President Wilson was delivering an address of welcome to the new citizens. The pupils were interested, but the tearful joy experienced by these peasants over their newly acquired American citizenship was incomprehensible to the children. I then asked them to continue the story by writing about what could happen to Ivan and Anna a year later. After I had read the results of their efforts, my enthusiasm vanished. They disposed of the struggles of these hopeful citizens in short order. Ivan and Anna, according to some, had become prosperous owners of a farm in the West. To others, Ivan became a foreman of a large manufacturing plant. This—in one short year. One boy, talented, but quite opposed to the change from the traditional course had them run over and killed in the busy traffic of New York City. Such responses were my

fault. In my eagerness I had failed to prepare the pupils for an assignment of this kind. What did they know about immigration restrictions or naturalization laws? Upon me was thrust the realization that the sensitizing process is slow of growth. Understanding must come before feeling. The next step, then, was a backward one of instruction in the necessary facts to insure understanding. Hereafter throughout the course social science and English were more closely correlated.

A later attempt to stimulate emotional response was undertaken with less confidence. A number of books which tell about people coming to a new country had been placed in the classroom library at the beginning of the year. Four copies of each book had been provided to allow for the reading of the same story by several pupils simultaneously. These books were now briefly introduced, and the reading was done at home while the work on the unit proceeded. When enough time for the reading had elapsed, the stories were presented to the class by a panel of members who had read the same book. Various other methods of presentation were also used, but the panel proved to be the most popular and enlightening method. In selection of the books we were careful to include those representing a range of nationalities and different cultures. To find books on a high enough level for advanced readers was rather difficult. The books chosen proved to be easy reading, but they brought out problems of adjustment, obstacles and prejudices which newcomers to our land are compelled to face and also some of the opportunities they receive.

My Mother and I by Elizabeth Stern is an excellent book to illustrate the immigrants' adjustment to a new country. It was also a good one to use for the first panel as a pattern for others, for it is easily divided into parts for discussion. It especially emphasizes the differences in adjustment between the younger and older generations. Pre-planning for this panel was very important and very carefully done by the participating group. Problems, customs, ideas were stressed rather than details of the story itself. And this first presentation was a success. Even the boys joined wholeheartedly in the follow-up discussion, though the problems concerned a girl and her mother.

Other books on the list were presented generally in the same way and with varying success. *Anything Can Happen* by George and Helen Papashvily, *Syrian Yankee* by Salome Rizk, *Let the Hurricane Roar* by Rose Wilder were the general favorites. *Petar's Treasure*, *Michael's Victory*, and *The Lost Violin*—all by Clara Judson illustrated the topic but were rather easy reading for the majority. Some of the pupils accepted these stories in good faith. A few were inclined to assume a critical attitude toward the customs and manners of the newcomers. They gained greater respect for other peoples, however, as the work progressed.

A study of the contributions of the immigrants needed to be stressed. I tried to stimulate interest by reading an excerpt from Franklin P. Lane's address delivered at America's Making Exposition. "Each brought with them," he said, "a distinct culture.

"And all brought hands with which to work,

And all brought minds that could conceive."

Several stories from *Meet an American* were also read, and the class worked in groups, each group taking a different nationality to discover the respective contributions. Not only the larger contributions, such as art, music, philanthropy, finance, ideals were stressed but also the homely things of everyday life—the foods we eat, the clothes we wear, et cetera. A girl who had chosen "the sports we play" enlisted her entire family in the project to help her find advertisements to illustrate her booklet. Another girl brought to class a poem she had discovered and with which she was pleased. "It was written by a Jewish immigrant," she explained. The poem proved to be "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus, inscribed on the Statue of Liberty.

I had purposely left out the contribution of the Negro in this last activity. I wished the whole class to become participants in it. For a library assignment I gave each pupil the name of a Negro who had contributed his share to America. These were to be identified only, but some became so interested in the stories of Booker T. Washington, of George Washington Carver, of "Angel Mo," and of *Railroad to Freedom* that they unwittingly projected a lesson in biography. Before that study got under way, a period was spent on the poem, *The North Star Shining* by Hildegard Hoyt Swift, a pictorial history of the American Negro. A roll call of pupils was answered by identification of the name looked up. Then for twenty minutes, I thoughtfully read the poem aloud to the class. At the end of the reading, perfect silence reigned for a

minute and a half. Then the most uncooperative boy in the class remarked almost in a whisper, "It's true—every bit of it." The pupils needed no further research on this subject.

By this time the whole class was really working. What had they accomplished? Had they reached the objective? This was a difficult study to test objectively. The written compositions, remarks made by the pupils talking to me before and after school, their reactions to the stories—all these made me feel they were "on the way." But how far? I made one attempt to find out. Curious to see how many of the central ideas they had acquired during the course, I assigned as the topic of a final paper, "What ideas have you gained from this study?" All pupils succeeded in naming two or three out of the five selected by my colleague and me. One boy named them all.

Inequalities of Opportunities

The class was better prepared now to begin the study of Unit Two, a complement of Unit One. They had become used to research, had broken away from the traditional pattern, had learned how to lift significant problems out of books, and to undertake a continuous purposeful study.

We began the study of Unit Two by reading together "The Kiskis" by May Vontver. This story reveals the sensitive feelings of people in low economic groups who hold themselves aloof from others because they feel they "don't belong." In this story the children of the Kiski family were the sensitive ones. They had to wear gunny sacks to school in place of shoes, and they wouldn't eat their lunch with the other children

because they were ashamed of their meager one.

To show that people in higher levels of society may have the same feeling of "not belonging," the story "Not Wanted" by Jessie Lynch Williams was read. In this story a rich father's interest in his own business affairs kept him from writing to his son, who after his mother's death had been placed in a fashionable boarding school. To hide his humiliation when he failed to receive letters like the other boys he wrote letters to himself and showed them to his classmates. Following the reading of both these stories the pupils tried to write on the topic, "I Didn't Belong." But this feeling apparently hadn't entered very deeply into their lives.

Many stories have been written to reveal inequalities of opportunity. *Things Greater Than He* and *Call Me Charley*, by Jesse Jackson show inequalities because of race. When I read aloud the "Swimming Incident" from the latter book, the reactions were almost violent. "Why didn't Charley fight back?" they exclaimed. They didn't understand the futility of fighting prejudice. It seemed so easy for Charley to demand his rights. *Yours Lovingly* by Eugenie Courtright shows discrimination against people of different races. This story of a very ill Indian boy, much neglected in a government school for Indians, appealed to the pupils as a story, but they thought the situation improbable, until they learned that it was true. The author herself was the sympathetic secretary. The story of *The Horse* by Marian McNeeley is valuable as a study of this kind, because it reveals prejudices against those in a

different social level. It is a revelation of how a soul can be killed and a whole life blighted by thoughtless name calling. The follow-up assignment of a theme, "An Adjustment I Had To Make," proved to have more enlightening results than the "Not Belonging" one. The compositions were lacking in interest and impact when compared to the stories read to them. The pupils were, however, making a beginning in relating situations found in stories, to those in their own lives. One very retiring pupil startled herself and all the class by speaking out loudly after the "Boy Wanted" story was read. "That's just like my father," she said. "He gives us anything we want, but he doesn't have time for us."

Because I knew my class well after almost three years with them, I dared to read them a story with a powerful impact, *The Prelude*, by Albert Halpert. It is a story of bitter prejudice against the Jews during the last World War. The pupils listened tensely. The story was almost too powerful to discuss, but the Jewish pupils accepted it wisely and entered into the subsequent reactions. It proved to the class that "fighting back" wasn't always easy for everyone. One Jewish girl came to me after class and said, "I think it better for all concerned to bring these prejudices out in the open."

During the weeks of study of these sensitizing stories, books to be read at home were again given out. These had been selected to show a variety of discriminations, and again there were four of each. Panel reports followed as in Unit One. *Tradition* by M. Emery and *Willow Hill* by Phyllis Whitney proved to be the most popular. The others

were *Teresita of the Valley* and *The Moved-Outers* by Florence C. Means, and *Keystone Kids* by Tunis. These stories were used as bases of discussion about inequalities of opportunities among the different races, religions and low economic groups. *Tradition*, a story of a Japanese girl who was indifferent to discriminatory action against her, and who satisfied her yearnings by strict attention to her musical education was often referred to. Dorothy was quite real to them.

The Negro situation, so well presented in *Willow Hill* had not at that time been accepted by all. But after the panel on that book, two important films were shown: "Brotherhood of Man" and "Boundary Lines." At first the pupils were inclined to laugh at the queer figures, but when they began to see the point of each one, they watched quietly. One girl whispered to me, "I wish my mother could see this." They were eager to discuss them and were quite intelligent in their reactions. Later on they read avidly *In Henry's Back Yard* and *All About Us* whenever they could obtain these books. My student teacher conducted the follow-up lesson to the films while I recorded the responses: "Might be used to solve some of the present world difficulties." "Doesn't show white race as superior." When one pupil asked why the white line changed to red, another pupil quickly responded, "Red is a danger sign. When prejudice begins, there is danger."

Exploring the Communities

At this stage the class was ready to go into the different communities of the city. From the stories they had become

aware of the inequalities of opportunity in housing, education, health, recreation and employment operating against Negroes, Jews and Spanish-speaking peoples. The next concern was what has and can be done about it. Accordingly, a trip to one of the five new housing units was planned. The chief purpose was to show the pupils what had been done to improve living conditions in Denver, but along with this to show how people in other sections of Denver live. They were much concerned about children of school age not being in school and about those who lacked space to play. The directors of the housing units afterwards visited were very cooperative, explaining the conditions under which people were admitted and arranging for us to have a glimpse at the inside of one of the homes. So many and varied were the reports made after each visit that they were written and put into book form along with photographs taken by some of the pupils and the student teacher.

The crowning trip of all was the one to an elementary school where Anglos, Negroes and Spanish-speaking people work and play together. Much praise is due to the principal who not only explained how the different nationalities get along with each other, but who had planned ahead to have our pupils separate into groups to visit different agencies in the community. They began to see through this trip that friction between individuals is created by other reasons besides those of color and creed. The discussions which followed took two whole periods, and the pupils had outside written assignments as well. The papers written on the topic "What

America Means to Me," which was given as a contest title by the National Council of Christians and Jews, showed decided changes in attitude.

Five years have passed since the class left for schools of higher learning. Many of the members are in college now, one or two are married. Frequently during their high school days they came back to visit and they invariably asked, "Are you teaching the same course to the present 9A's? I'll surely never forget it." Years will tell as they advance further into adulthood whether they really changed. Will they ever "be the same again"?

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