

Values, Too, Can Cause Discrimination

Educators only recently have become sensitive to the issue of the relationship between the school program and the prevailing value systems. This author points out the need for the school to provide opportunities for youngsters to learn to make wise choices in terms of the characteristics and integrity of each individual.

WE LIVE IN A heterogeneous society. As members of that society, we differ in countless ways: our ethnic origins, our material wealth, our physical characteristics, our individual capacities and potentialities. Of perhaps greatest significance, we differ in our values.

Values have been most simply defined as "directives for behavior,"¹ and, as such, underlie our preferences for objects, for persons, for activities and for goals. And casual observation tells us that we differ in those preferences, and thus presumably in our values.

One man's meat is another man's poison. One man prefers baseball, another football. Some gentlemen prefer blondes, others brunettes. Mr. Jones' one major purpose in life is to make money as quickly as possible so that he can retire as soon as possible; Mr. Smith is so in love with his work that the thought of retirement is a painful one for him. One woman takes great pride in her home; another is so concerned with community problems that

home responsibilities are of secondary importance to her. Mrs. Miller likes bridge; Mrs. Bennett thinks bridge-playing a waste of time. These are differences in preferences and reflect differences in values.

Just as we adults differ in our values, so do children and youth. One child is an insatiable reader, another reads only what and when he must. One youngster dreams of going to college and learning more and more about chemistry; another dreams of the day when compulsory schooling is finished and he can get a job as a garage mechanic and tinker to his heart's delight. May gives a lot of her attention to personal grooming and is always dressed neatly and attractively. Sally doesn't seem to care; casual is the word for her.

Bob, a seventh grader, is presented with a choice of reading one of two books: *The Mystery at the Double D Ranch* or *Penelope Goes to Summer Camp*. It is not difficult to predict the choice he will make. He has a value system which makes one book more acceptable than the other. He happens to share that value system with others

¹ Michael, D. M. "A Cross-Cultural Investigation of Closure." *J. Abnorm. Soc. Psychol.*, 1953, 48, 225-230.

like him: boys, seventh graders, same school, same community, same state, same nation. But yet there are differences within this group, differences which become apparent when the choice is between *The Mystery at the Double D Ranch* and *How Sam Dawson Won the Soap-Box Derby*. Now it is much more difficult to predict which book Bob will prefer. He may be more interested in cars than in horses and choose the latter.

Our children and youth do differ in what they like to do as well as in what they can do. And, in their tendency to differ in these respects, they are like their superiors in age, adults. Once we accept the existence of these differences, we can address ourselves to two related questions:

1. Do we discriminate in today's schools against some children and youth because of their values?

2. Should we so discriminate?

We educators have long been aware of individual differences of all kinds. We are sensitive to that wide gap between the most and the least intelligent, the best and the poorest reader, the most and the least alert child, the fastest- and the slowest-reacting youngster, the tallest and the shortest, the heaviest and the slightest. In our teaching methods, our instructional materials, and in our classroom activities, we try to take account of such individual differences. We are ever searching for the kind of educational environment in which the less intelligent individual can make better use of the ability that he has. Or for the kind of books which the poorer reader can handle successfully. Or for the kind of playground games in which

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the shorter or the slighter or the slower of our youngsters can experience some degree of mastery. We are not only aware of individual differences; we accept them and do all we can to adjust to them in the educational program. But we know that despite all we do, individual differences will persist. In fact, experience and research have taught us that these differences will tend to increase in magnitude as a result of schooling and that the better the schooling the greater these differences become. That is to say, we accept individual differences at the beginning *and* at the end of schooling. We accept diversity.

Diversity or Uniformity in Values

But we are less inclined to accept diversity in values. Instead we move in the direction of developing uniformity in values. Our schools are prone to indicate, through demonstration and definition, some choices as acceptable, others as nonacceptable *for all children and youth*. These choice (or value) prescriptions usually take place in a subtle fashion, for the individual teacher is often unaware that he or she is prescribing a value system; the prescriptions are all the more effective for that reason.

What is the nature of the value system which the schools seem to be imposing upon all children and youth? Perhaps we can not agree upon an answer to this question. But many

students of American schools would call it the value system of the middle class, in which such values as these are emphasized: competition, industry, independence, material success, cleanliness, conformity, striving, friendliness.²

Whatever we may think of these values ourselves, we must admit that to some children they will be foreign indeed. For many of our youngsters come from homes in which these middle class values are not accepted or approved. To the extent that we insist that the price of acceptance is adherence to these middle class values, we discriminate against a large minority of our students.

As an example of such discrimination, an account of a girl who was approaching graduation from high school may be applicable. She was an exceedingly intelligent person and had used her ability in ways that were a delight to her teachers. It should be noted that they valued her for her uniqueness with respect to ability and achievement. They had high hopes for her in the future. But they were profoundly disturbed by the fact that in her dress and grooming she did not conform to the standards of her peers. She was clean enough and neat enough but inclined to be eccentric. One noticed her because she was different. It was as if she had learned to express her individuality not only in her academic work but in her dress. It was the latter kind of uniqueness that

² See a discussion of the American character in William E. Martin and Celia Burns Stendler, *Child Development: The Process of Growing Up in Society*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953. p. 261-281.

was a cause of concern to her well-wishers. Finally one of the most tactful of her teachers was delegated the responsibility of approaching her upon the desirability of dressing more in conformity with the group standards. I presume, although I do not know, that she adopted this advice and is now indistinguishable, in dress, at least, from thousands of her peers.

Must the School Discriminate in Values?

This is both an extreme and a trivial example, but I use it to dramatize the point I am trying to make. Because, in less striking ways, we discriminate against many children and adolescents in school because their choices indicate some diversity in values. It may be in the ways they express themselves in writing or speaking, in the hobbies they adopt, in the models they choose to emulate, in the intensity and extensity of their ambition. We smile on some and frown on others. We do discriminate.

Perhaps we can agree for the moment that we do discriminate against children because of their values and that we do attempt to impose a uniform set of values. But then it is fair to ask: Are these not functions of the school? Is it not therefore impossible to avoid discrimination of this kind?

A strong argument can be made for answers in the affirmative to both these questions. Some uniformity in values would seem to be necessary if our society is to be a society and not just an aggregation of people. A program of public education would seem to be the means by which such a uniformity

in values could be achieved. Because ours is a heterogeneous society—many different groups of people with many different sets of values, the task is very difficult. But it is no less necessary.

Children from minority groups, groups which for reasons of ethnic origin or color or socioeconomic status are somewhat out of the mid-stream of American life, come to school with deficiencies in value-development. They must learn new values and unlearn old ones. We must approve any evidence that new learning is taking place; we must disapprove any evidence that previous learned values are persisting. In other words, we must discriminate.

This argument makes several assumptions, however, that may be untenable. The most crucial of these is that uniformity—at least, such absolute uniformity—is a social necessity. Is it not possible that our ultimate strength may lie in the diversity of values that we allow and even encourage to develop? Is it not possible for the school to place before the child or youth several value alternatives and then develop in him both skill and perceptiveness in making choices from among them with knowledge of and responsibility for the consequences of his actions? Can we not point out the advantages and disadvantages of certain choices, but then give our students opportunities to make the choices themselves? For is it not the experience provided by such opportunities that will develop in youngsters the ability some day to make wise choices for themselves as adults?

Of course, these choices cannot be unlimited in number and kind. Man's history has taught him that some

alternatives cannot be permitted for the good of the individual and of the group. But man's wisdom is not yet so great that he can say with complete confidence that any one alternative is superior for *all* persons in *all* situations at *all* times.

So long as we have a heterogeneous society, we shall have diversity in values. Every individual upon arriving at maturity will be confronted with that diversity. It can hardly be argued that the school is carrying out its responsibility to that society by educating its young in a program of choicelessness. Nor can it be argued that the school has as its function the creation of a choiceless society, one in which there is complete consensus on values. Rather than discriminating against youngsters because of their diversity in values, the school ought to value that diversity. It ought to encourage the unusual, the creative, the original and, yes, even the eccentric. It ought to furnish opportunities where youngsters learn to make wise choices, wise not in terms of some imposed value system, but wise in terms of the characteristics and experiences and integrity of each individual.

The one value to which the school should give its unqualified allegiance is that of heterogeneity. For it is in heterogeneity that history tells us our strength lies. As Seward has pointed out so aptly in a recent paper: "If Freud was correct in observing that neurosis is the price of civilization, we may as correctly observe that sterility is the price of homogeneity."³

³ Seward, Georgene H. "Learning Theory and Identification: V. Some Cultural Aspects of Identification." *J. Genet. Psychol.*, 1954, p. 84, p. 229-236.

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