

# Preventing Prejudice Against SPANISH-SPEAKING CHILDREN

A program to develop wholesome human relationships and to lessen prejudice among school children with different cultural and language backgrounds must call into play the basic principles of curriculum planning. This article relates these principles to a fundamental and pervasive problem.

**P**REJUDICE against those who speak a different mother language is certainly understandable. Language is the vehicle by which a major amount of human interchange is made possible. It is, indeed, the media through which human relationships develop and gain expression. Language is so much a part of our living that we have become dependent upon it for knowing what the other person is doing, how he is feeling, what opinions he has, and even how he feels about us. We are influenced positively toward accepting a person when he speaks clearly and we can follow his thinking. On the other hand, we become uncomfortable or suspicious when someone whispers to another in our presence or when someone uses fragments of foreign language which we do not understand. We feel fenced out of the communication, and since we have such a keen sensitivity to others, we feel uncomfortable because of it. Feelings of hostility are likely to begin.

Is it not understandable, then, that anything which impedes our knowing

and understanding others blocks the development of good human relationships? In fact, when people live differently than we do and in ways that deny us free and full association with them, there begins an element of human resistance within us. Different mother languages can, and sometimes do, impede human relationships and create human resistances.

However, prejudice against those who speak a different mother language is probably more truly a prejudice against those who practice a different way of life. It is not difference in language alone; innumerable interrelationships are involved—customs, mores, folkways, languages. All these affect communication and human interchange. Hence, we are blocked on various fronts from knowing and understanding those with different ways of life. Such is the case with the Spanish-speaking children in the Southwestern part of the United States.

Admittedly, to list these factors alone is to present an oversimplification of the reasons for prejudice against Spanish-speaking children of Latin-American ancestry. There is no denying certain physical characteristics—

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*Dwight Teel is director, Division of Curricular Services, Corpus Christi Public Schools, Corpus Christi, Texas.*

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darker complexion of skin and deeper intense blackness of hair, for example—which differentiate the Latin-American from the neighboring Anglo-American. However, these differences seem not to stand in the way of good human relationships so much themselves as they serve to symbolize numerous feelings and attitudes developed through other relationships. To many persons, the Latin-American has been earmarked as less well educated—oftentimes as illiterate—and as a source of cheap labor. He is associated with the concepts of poor housing, crowded living, and high birth rate. Frequently the Latin-American is stereotyped as irresponsible and undependable. By some Anglo-Americans he is considered an intruder crowding up “our” country and cities. Such are the overtones of feelings among many people, feelings often called into play by the Spanish language and against children who speak Spanish.

Schools must recognize this condition in their efforts to develop wholesome human relationships and prevent prejudice. The problem involved is one of the biggest challenges facing democratic education; it is one of the most crucial in terms of world understanding and peace, for learning to live in a world begins with learning to live in our own community.

### **What Schools Can Do**

#### *Practice a Living Acceptance of Others*

If we believe in learning by doing, what can be more effective in developing human relationships than the way in which we help children live together? By and large, the days are gone

of segregating Latin-American from Anglo-American children by maintaining separate schools for them. Likewise gone is the practice of registering the children as Anglo, Latin, or Negro. There are still numerous schools in which enrollments are practically 100 percent Latin-American because of the school-neighborhood being a Latin-American residential area. However, in schools where both Anglo- and Latin-American children attend, there is a definite trend away from segregating Anglos and Latins of primary ages into separate classes and toward grouping the children on some other basis such as age or alphabet. What could teach prejudice more quickly than to separate children on the basis of ancestral background?

Some educators believe that children learn better when they are grouped homogeneously. Consequently, there has been a strong tendency to assign beginning children who speak English in one class and those who speak Spanish in another. However, as this practice has given way to grouping children on other bases and having both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking beginners in the same class, first grade teachers who formerly taught segregated groups have testified to the value of the newer practice. They find that the English-speaking child is not held back, as formerly it was feared he would be, and the Spanish-speaking child learns English more readily and more naturally.

In classes where the teacher is the only person who speaks English there is little incentive for children to use English. They use it only in class situations and most often learn an



artificial English response to certain words or actions. The language is not genuine; it has not evolved from children's experiences but has been "fitted on" in teacher-made situations. Words become distorted through lack of understanding and their use is awkward and often erroneous. Children drop the English and "communicate" in Spanish at every opportunity.

On the other hand, when English- and Spanish-speaking children are together, there is a real need for the English language — to communicate with peers. This is the natural way for language to be learned. It evolves naturally from the experiences the children have together and talk about as they live and learn together. The teacher's instruction in learning English builds upon a real need for communication. There is need for grouping within the class for certain phases of instruction just as there is in any class.

One of the first steps, then, toward preventing prejudice against Spanish-speaking children is to think seriously about the relationships we set up by forming our classes. The basis for class assignments can make a big difference in acceptance of others or in forming prejudice against them.

#### ***Practice Basic Principles of Fostering Security***

Basic to social learnings free from prejudice against others is an environment of enjoyment and success with others. This need as expressed here is the very same as expressed for *all* children: dealing with problems real to children, giving children a sense of success and accomplishment, gear-

ing activities to children's abilities and levels of maturity, etc. As this need is met, children gain security, both within themselves and in their relationships with others. There is less and less need for a competitive feeling of "better than" because the children are secure enough not to require a source of compensation.

In such an environment, where children experience pleasure and a sense of accomplishment together, they learn to include all members of the group in their pleasant thoughts of the experiences. Each person is accepted as a person in his own right and it matters less and less how his name is spelled. Feelings about him become positive rather than negative—for him rather than against him. Another important step toward preventing prejudice against Spanish-speaking children, then, is to provide a learning environment in our schools where they are regular members in groups experiencing enjoyment and success in their school activities. Prejudice can be prevented by practicing good psychology.

#### ***Teach Acceptance of Others Through Participation in Achieving Common Goals***

Included in the concept above, but important enough to deserve further discussion, is the need for teaching acceptance of others. The teacher must help children understand that every person is important for himself, that every person has a contribution to make, and that every person has a right to learn. As children understand these principles they begin practicing an acceptance of others — language differences or not! The best way to help children acquire these understandings



is letting them experience the principles under guidance.

If we believe in learning by doing, what could be more effective in preventing prejudice than facing our problems together and working together to achieve common goals? America saw the results of such united efforts during World War II when neighbors banded together and learned to understand and appreciate one another in ways before unrealized by them. Common undertakings foster understanding and acceptance.

When children work as a group to better their school, there is opportunity for every child to contribute. If the children work as a class to beautify their classroom, to solve the problem of inadequate playground space, or to help a needy family, the project involves them all. Through becoming interested in the group project they become interested in what and how each child can contribute most effectively in the project. Interest in each child means appreciation of and for him. Barriers of the unknown give way to understanding and prejudices disappear as appreciation and friendship take root. Joint participation fosters good human relationships and helps prevent prejudice.

#### *Build Understanding and Appreciation*

Once children acquire a reasonable degree of the personal and social security so essential for productive living and the acceptance of others in terms of likenesses among all people, we can then begin to build understandings and appreciations in those areas of differences. As children develop understanding, the differences cease

being barriers and become sources of appreciation for those who contribute the difference. This is especially evident when children develop new abilities and skills enabling them to use and enjoy the things that previously set them apart. Such is the case with children learning to use the language of other children.

The Corpus Christi, Texas, public schools teach conversational Spanish, beginning at the third grade level, on the theory that knowing the language of others is one way of understanding and appreciating them. Just as Latin-American children develop facility in English, Anglo-American children reciprocate by learning Spanish. It seems reasonable that the two groups are drawn closer together as their communication abilities increase, in school and out.

The study of Spanish does not stop, however, with the study of the language per se. The language evolves from a way of living. Teaching Spanish includes teaching the culture of the Spanish-speaking people and their various media of expression—their music, art, drama, dance and ceremonies. In a number of schools the Pan-American Club has carried the learnings much further than it is possible to do in regular classroom activities. Understanding and appreciation fostered by such a program lessen the prejudice which otherwise might be held.

#### *Help Children Overcome Obstacles*

Many little things get in our way of preventing prejudice. Difficulty with a second language is certainly one that looms up large for many people. For example, it is not uncommon for per-





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sons learning a second language to develop faulty pronunciations for certain words. Even though the faulty pronunciations may not get in the way of communication, they do call attention to the speaker's language. The writer knows of teachers who make special efforts to help children over this barrier wherever possible. The teachers work hard to teach Spanish-speaking children the correct English sounds and to build a desire to use them.

Such faulty pronunciations as "souise" for "south" or "mees" for "miss" impede the Spanish-speaking child's full acceptance by English-speaking children. In the writer's experience, Latin-Americans who speak English fluently and articulate clearly are accepted into business agreements and positions of responsibility much

more readily than those who have faulty English. When businessmen select employees to meet the public, considerable attention is given to the applicant's ability to communicate easily with the customer.

Teaching Spanish-speaking children correct English pronunciations can certainly contribute to acceptance of the children by the public as a whole and help erase the barrier in employment opportunities.

**Base Teaching on Local Needs**

Space will permit only two brief examples of study being based on local needs. The problem of nutrition is a very real one among many Latin-American families in Corpus Christi. Some principals and teachers have capitalized on this local need to build a more meaningful curriculum for the children. For example, in a unit of foods, many fourth grade Latin-American children learned the names and good taste of common foods before unknown to them.

An elementary school teacher of Home and Family Living told the writer about teaching a class to make toast. Two years later a girl reported to the teacher that she herself had learned how to make toast when her older sister had brought the idea home.

As simple as these learnings are, they are basic common experiences in our American way of living. As Latin-American families learn these common practices they will find themselves more and more accepted into communities. Moreover, there will be less need on the part of the Latin-American family to cling so defensively to the old ways which set them apart. Acceptance is fostered and prejudice fades away.

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