Teachers mean to influence children's social values constructively, but it is hard to be specific about how and whether they're doing it. It has been easier to assume that good attitudes are "caught" in the school situation than to deal directly with teaching them. Several elementary school faculties in Springfield, Missouri, participated in a cooperative action research project to improve their identification of some of the values they meant to teach, thus suggesting ways they could make a difference and means of evaluating what they had done. They concluded that teachers can teach values directly without distortion and can work on the problem in the course of their regular work.

First, they needed to understand the children's current value structure. Concerning this, they made some surprising discoveries which they offer for other teachers to verify. They assert that this inquiry led them to better teaching. The process they employed is reported fully in Children's Social Values: An Action Research Study. 1

The problems they studied involved responsibility ("follow-through"), initiative, independence, sharing, considerateness, and learning to act for the good of the group.

Each group first had to learn to define values as behavior. This was not easy. For example, teachers varied greatly in what they thought was "considerate" behavior. Only through a lengthy process that involved repeated observation and the use of open-ended questions and other forms of evidence was such a behavioral definition possible. In the last analysis, each cooperating group had to settle for an arbitrary working definition—"this is what it is for purposes of our study." The definition they achieved was usually in answer to the question they learned to ask: "What is a child doing when he is being 'considerate'?"

As is true in the study of a single child, the recording of behavior leads quickly to studies of what lies behind what is observed. In this case, the teachers sought information from the children, who were given slightly disguised anecdotal material and asked to explain it. The general conclusions they reached were predictable, but the details behind them were sometimes surprising. They call for further verification. They were: (a) Children's social attitudes in school are largely determined by the forces of the school society as the children see it; (b) The code of children's social behavior at
school is largely the product of their attempts to keep these school social forces in balance; and (c) Teachers have a powerful effect on children’s attitudes and values in school.

Insight into the child’s view of the social structure gave the teachers cues as to what they might do to improve their teaching of the values they were working on. For one thing, the teachers had to learn the children’s language. Terms like “responsibility,” “considerateness,” and “initiative” are not in the children’s lexicon of value judgment. The terms in it are “hair,” “my ways,” “I’ll hit right back,” etc.

The children implied that many of their social values are related to their status with other children. It seemed strongly implied that teachers might well give explicit attention to helping children to achieve good peer status on an enduring, morally right, basis.

The idea that values can be taught and the ways of working of the Springfield groups suggest many possibilities for cooperative action research. The years of study in which the Springfield groups participated produced significant results, which point to broad areas of children’s value development of which little is known. As teachers continue to use their valuable teaching experience and insights for such research, they will make additional contributions to the development of the knowledge and skills needed for value education.

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