

# PERSONAL ENCOUNTER FOR SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING

R. MURRAY THOMAS

Dean, School of Education

University of California, Santa Barbara

EACH day's news reports make it clearer that of all the goals which social-studies programs are supposed to achieve, that of *social understanding* is the one demanding the most urgent attention from educators. The term "social understanding," as we intend it here, means that students learn:

1. The ways people of different ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic groups are alike and are different from each other, and
2. What factors determine whether people exhibiting these likenesses and differences will live together in harmony or in conflict.

Teachers use a variety of methods for pursuing these social-understanding objectives. One is to assign students to read about intergroup relations, such as in biographies of people facing intergroup conflicts, in reports of research on prejudice, and in novels or short stories picturing life in other nations or in subcultures of American society. Motion pictures, television broadcasts, and school dramas also teach of facts and feelings in this realm.

But the method to which we shall point the present discussion is more direct. It is that of providing personal encounters—direct personal interaction between the pupil and people of ethnic, social class, or religious status different from his own.

Teaching by personal encounter is certainly not new. It precedes all other methods of learning about one's fellow man. But the method is particularly pertinent to discuss today since so many communities are enjoying—or ofttimes suffering—a more varied social mix of students than ever before. This trend toward increased social heterogeneity within a school has resulted chiefly from two factors: the accelerated nationwide population mobility occurring since World War II and the recent enforced integration of schools. Much of the intention behind integration has been to produce personal encounters—to force pupils of varied ethnic and socioeconomic status to interact directly over a period of years.

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### **Nearness Is Not Enough**

The idea that face-to-face contact promotes understanding and tolerance has received support from many quarters. Will Rogers is credited with testifying, "I've never met a man I didn't like." The American armed forces have reported success in furthering interracial harmony through the ethnic integration of their units.

Yet as the overflowing divorce courts indicate, nearness itself is not enough. The conditions surrounding the personal encounter determine whether such interaction produces understanding or quite the opposite. So it becomes one of the teacher's tasks to analyze the factors influencing the quality of interaction in his class—and particularly to estimate the nature of students' perceptions of each other—then to act to correct those conditions which block understanding. The following two cases illustrate how two teachers attempted such analysis and action.

#### **Case 1: Overgeneralizing from Limited Data**

Near Washington, D.C., a high school finally signaled its acceptance of integration by permitting three Negro sophomores to enroll. One was a girl who brought from her all-Negro junior high school a record of academic success and good adjustment. But in her new senior-high situation she distinguished herself mostly by sullenness and poor academic performance. This discrepancy between the girl's past record and her current achievement disturbed the teacher of the speech class in which she was enrolled. He suspected that her sullen, unenthusiastic approach to school was her defensive reaction to feeling universally disliked by schoolmates and teachers because she was colored. The teacher estimated that her negative perception had grown in the following manner:

1. She had overgeneralized the abuse she received from a few white students and had assumed this abuse represented the feelings all the whites had toward her. That is, some local white students who brought strong prejudices toward Negroes from their own homes, saw the advent of colored students in school as a threat to their own status. So they reacted by taunting the three Negroes and by shoving them in the corridors or on the stairway. The colored girl apparently interpreted this treatment as confirmation of her fears that every white person in school was an enemy.

2. In face of what she perceived as universal threat, she had adopted the defenses of moroseness and neglect of her school work. She failed to realize that many of her schoolmates harbored no ill-will toward her as a Negro, but her sullen demeanor did not encourage their friendship nor did her poor academic performance encourage their admiration. Since these classmates found her an unattractive personality, they left her alone.

3. Apparently many of the white students in the girl's classes tended to generalize that her behavior must be typical of all colored students. Her behavior strengthened their impression that Negroes are sullen, academically inept, and intellectually lazy.

In the speech teacher's estimate, the encounters between the whites and the colored girl produced repeated cycles of (a) negative perceptions of each other's behavior, (b) over-generalizations of these perceptions, and (c) further negative reactions to each other. The teacher decided to break into this cycle by first revising the girl's perception of him as a white teacher. This might change her behavior into a type the non-prejudiced white students could admire, so their subsequent encounters with her would become positive and supportive.

The teacher managed this by inviting the girl to try out for the key role of a colored servant in the school's next dramatic production, *The Little Foxes*. She was at first suspicious. But as she and the teacher read the script together, she became convinced that he was expressing great confidence in her, for the servant's role was a crucial one for making the drama's strong point about prejudice. She agreed to try. Fortunately for the teacher's strategy, the girl showed marked talent. She was a great dramatic success. She earned honest admiration and friendship among the other students in the cast. By the time the play was performed publicly, she had become the pleasant, hard-working student which her junior-high-school record had foretold. Throughout her three years in high school she remained a member of the dramatic club and was elected president of it in her senior year.

The girl's dramatic abilities did not win her universal friendship. Many students still ignored her, and some occasionally expressed their scorn. But after *The Little Foxes*, she had a core of faithful friends and admirers, and she apparently had learned to distinguish between her classmates as individuals rather than lumping them together as all prejudiced white students.

#### **Case 2: Revising Perceived Groupings**

A fifth-grade class in a small Western city consisted of twenty-eight pupils: twelve of Mexican ancestry, eleven of Anglo-European, and five Negro. The children represented both lower-class and middle-class socioeconomic strata.

The teacher observed early in the fall that his pupils tended to form cliques representing their ethnic and social-class backgrounds. Open remarks about "Whitey" and "Mex" and "Niggers" were not uncommon. When conflicts arose in the classroom or on the playground, factions would frequently form along ethnic and social-class lines. The teacher surmised that the principal way the pupils perceived their group identities was according to their ethnic differences. To check this impression, he asked the students on one occasion to list the names of their best friends in the classroom and on another occasion the names of the classmates they would like to work with on a science project. His impression was confirmed.

It was his hope that during the school year the pupils would change their habit

of clustering themselves so strongly along ethnic lines and would perceive themselves as being grouped in more varied ways. He believed that if he could effect such a change in perceptions, pupils would more often determine their interaction with others on the basis of shared interests and a classmate's individual worth, not just by skin color or socioeconomic level.

To pursue his goal, the instructor adopted the following kinds of practices:

1. For purposes of instruction in reading and arithmetic he formed subgroups representing three ability groups, and in social studies, three interest groups. Children of the three ethnic divisions were represented in each of these subject-matter subgroups. This encouraged them to perceive each other in such terms as "the faster readers" or "the ones reporting on Brazil."

2. When the teacher commented to the class about a child's success with an activity, his comments clustered pupils by other than ethnic or social-class criteria. "The pictures on the front bulletin board show how well Carol, Rosa, Mario, and Hank imagined life in Argentina."

3. To emphasize a common bond among them all, he often spoke with pride of "our class" as contrasted with other classes in the school with which these fifth graders competed in athletics, assembly programs, science exhibits, and public-service campaigns. He pictured individual pupils' successes in terms which encouraged all of the children to identify with their achievements. "We can all be proud of the way our Harry Blake won the tumbling contest" or "Did you see how our three girls showed up so well in the school chorus?"

4. He frequently assigned pupils to aid each other with school work. His assignment of helpers for these activities often cut across ethnic lines. In each instance he tried to arrange for the encounter to result in obvious profit for both the child being helped (satisfaction at progressing more adequately with school work) and the one who gave the aid (pride in being trusted with this responsibility). Thus the interaction had pleasant results and encouraged future like encounters.

By the end of the school year it was apparent that pupils' perceptions had altered. The change was shown both in their daily interaction—that is, their responses to each other—and in their patterns of choices of best friends and of working companions when the teacher asked for such selections in May and early June.

In regard to the two cases described above, we should not fail to recognize that intergroup attitudes and misunderstandings are often so deep seated in tradition and in defensive feelings of personal inadequacy that they are highly resistive to change. Despite this fact teachers can frequently promote social understanding and tolerance by the use of methods which help pupils revise their perceptions of each other during their personal encounters. ☞



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