SCHOOLS have a historic mandate, however ambiguous, to prepare children to become functional members of society. Exposure to alternative life styles is, almost by definition, an important part of this process. While there may have been a time when American education tended to treat society as a homogeneous whole, we now recognize that alternative life styles have always been a part of the American scene; that much that is "good" in our culture has been contributed by individuals and groups outside the "mainstream"; and that much that we find "bad" today is, at least in part, a legacy of the "melting pot" approach to acculturation.

However, if schools have a duty to ensure that students are made aware of alternative life styles, they are also obliged to take into account the power realities of the social situation. There are potent and vocal forces in our society which fear any alteration of the status quo—in particular alterations such as those which have characterized the past two decades (for example, in terms of new attitudes toward sex, roles, drugs, careers, and education). These forces tend to view any change in previously accepted norms (however unrealistic those norms might have been) as a threat to their interests and existence—and they react accordingly. Given the opportunity, they would probably vote for suppression of, rather than exposure to, alternative life styles.

The conscientious educator is precisely in the middle. Children clearly need preparation for the kind of diversity they are bound to encounter later in life, including things which they are not able to foresee. At the same time, significant segments of the public are disturbed, in some cases quite legitimately, about the speed and direction of changes in our society. While this is probably not the optimum moment to launch into a nationwide curriculum project on alternative life styles, neither can we afford to ignore profound social, political, economic, ideological, and other kinds of changes that are now occurring in our lives.

What shall we do? We might begin by looking at the impetus behind this new concern for alternative life styles and some of the reasons for the controversy created thereby. We can then examine opportunities for fostering "life style awareness" already available within the existing educational framework. We can look at additional ways of helping children develop an ability to evaluate critically and to appreciate life styles other than their own.

It may be that much of the controversial

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content of the term "alternative life style" stems from a general misunderstanding of the term itself. Indeed, the very use of the word "alternative" indicates a choice between two mutually exclusive courses of action, and needlessly oversimplifies the situation. Life, as we know, is endlessly diverse. While the TV shows, magazine articles, and commercial advertisements would have us believe that the only "alternative life style" available involves long hair, open marriage (if any), "dropping out," alienation, motorbikes, and other "dire threats" to the status quo, our own experience tells us this is not the case.

There is no single "alternative life style." there are hundreds, thousands—maybe millions. Each person's life style is a composite of many vectors (for example, age, sex, ethnic/racial derivation, marital status, parental status, and socioeconomic status), and each vector is continuously variable across a broad spectrum. Thus, a political conservative may be a sexual radical and a theological middle-of-the-roader. It should also be noted that life style can and often does vary longitudinally—within the life span of an individual. Today's raging Communist may become tomorrow's conventional capitalist. What can we do to prepare a person to evaluate and appreciate a life style that he has himself rejected?

With these thoughts in mind, perhaps we should speak of "diverse" instead of "alternative" styles of life. Certainly, we should be as precise as possible in discussing the subject, and ensure that we and our audience-counterparts understand exactly what we are talking about. Defining terms is a good beginning.

A Rich Diversity

In today's America, public schools are veritable "laboratories of life style," characterized by a rich diversity among personnel—people whose tastes, politics, ages, attitudes, and values are different. This heterogeneity reflects, among other factors, the mobility of our society, the increased pace of school desegregation, and the rising power of the teaching profession.
Faculty retreats weld diverse individuals into a cohesive unit. Away from pressures of daily routine, people are better able to understand one another; ideally, this understanding will transfer back to the school environment.

School systems desegregated by court action have brought black and white children together and, in changing racial composition, have many times changed the class composition of schools. Legal action has likewise brought new blood—black and white—into faculties that were previously homogeneous in age, race, social class, and general life style.

The increased political "clout" of teacher organizations has encouraged more expression of "visible individuality" among teachers. Perhaps the teacher's relative anonymity in society has also contributed to an increasing willingness to diversify one's life style, with little risk to one's teaching job. Higher salaries and increased status have also acted to foster independence.

With all these opportunities available, what is the "average" school doing to foster an appreciation for the diversity of life style under its own roof? In too many cases, the answer is probably "Nothing."

However, given the popularization of the concept of values clarification, the availability of pertinent commercial materials, and the presence in many schools of staff members skilled in group dynamics, some real changes reflecting the pluralistic nature of school populations seem likely.

To the extent that a school is a microcosm of the larger society, a student's participation in an educational program may help to prepare him for life's diversity. On the other hand, without some structured interaction, today's students, geared to the passivity and stereotyping of their TV culture, could coexist in the same institution for
A kindergarten teacher leads a “magic circle” discussion with a small group of youngsters.

years, neither knowing nor understanding one another on any but the most superficial of levels.

If we accept knowing and understanding one another as a viable goal for the public school, a number of strategies to that end are available. The California-based Bessell Institute for Human Development offers one, called “Magic Circle.” This technique provides a setting in which encounter, rather than confrontation, is fostered, with students sharing, for example, their “happiest moments” or “favorite color.”

Another similar technique is the “Class Meeting,” described by William Glasser in Schools Without Failure (see also Glasser’s Identity Society). Here students are actively engaged in problem-solving processes. If the method operates successfully, students eventually attain a great degree of responsible self-determination in their educational program and social interaction. Inevitably, the problem solving relates to getting along with one another and to the opening of communication.

As group dynamics invades our curriculum, more students are learning the techniques of interviewing (avoiding “one-word answer” kinds of questions, and substituting instead, for example, “Describe . . .” or “Tell me more about . . .”). Resource people from the community are coming into the schools to discuss their careers and, inevitably, their ideas. Students who are skilled interviewers gain timely information and understanding as a result of such encounters—much more so than in the one-way communication of a set-piece speech.

Career education complements the goal of understanding and appreciating diverse life styles. All kinds of work are accorded dignity as they are examined in relation to the needs of society and the skills necessary to a particular job.

School programs encouraging multiage grouping and the use of adult volunteer teachers also broaden students’ experience with differences in race, social class, and age. Older children tutoring younger, senior citizens reading to children or assisting with industrial arts can help to establish mutual trust and respect across different generations; each serves as an ambassador for the ideas, attitudes, habits, and values of his or her age group.

With teachers and community members demanding a greater voice in all aspects of school operation, an ideal opportunity for the interaction and appreciation of diverse life styles presents itself. Superficial differences are often resolved when people understand, agree upon, and work toward a common goal. Good intentions, however, are not enough. Creative, competent leadership is absolutely mandatory if such a partnership is to work.

Failing this, educators face two choices. They can yield to the forces of the status quo and fall back upon a comfortable, closed, middle class ideal that, for a great many Americans, never existed. Or they can go to the society at large and demand new guidelines for acculturation. Both alternatives have their perils and, as usual, the middle way—developing and enlarging upon opportunities already available within the present structure—seems to many observers to be preferable.

References

