

Cultivating and Harvesting Attitudes Toward Others

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Substance, process, and action provide a framework in which personal growth and development continue long after day-to-day contact has ended.

THERE is an African proverb which says that "knowledge is like a garden; if it is not cultivated, it cannot be harvested." The cultivation of knowledge is what education is all about. But education is also about identifying and reinforcing values. Too often education systems succeed in cultivating knowledge but fail in producing citizens who will challenge and improve upon a society's values in addition to reflecting them. The harvest is then bitter and the price the society pays incalculable.

Western societies, like most others, are stratified socially, economically, and racially. The drama of human existence is largely determined by accidental circumstances which willy-nilly shape our everyday lives. Race, sex, and social class are important concepts in this context. Nowhere is this truer than with those of us who represent ethnic and racial minorities within Western societies.

Children of Afro-Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities perceive early in life the negative images of those representing the dominant groups in American society. The tendency to internalize this negative image is very great. Unfortunately we de-

velop, with a lot of assistance from others, a view of ourselves which is a "put down." Over months and years this view becomes ingrained in our consciousness and shapes our actions and attitudes.

Too often our first encounter with one of the formal institutions of society—the school—reinforces this negative view. In the process of transmitting knowledge, educational institutions also transmit the values which undergird those institutions and the society which they interpret and maintain.

Two hundred years after the American Revolution, 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, and 20 years after the Supreme Court decision rejecting segregated public education, white America is still not ready to accept the equality of the black, brown, and yellow citizens among us.

Addressing the Imperatives

In my view there is no more effective way to teach students to care, to feel, and to relate than for teachers to care, to feel, and to relate. Too few teachers address themselves to those imperatives of education which really matter:

1. The development in each student of respect for himself/herself and his/her cultural heritage

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2. The respect for the uniqueness of other students and their cultural heritages

3. The acquisition of the skills of survival in a racist society

4. The understanding of the processes by which learning and growing continue beyond formal education situations.

Too many teachers currently participate in the newest "rip off" in education—the teaching of values. I believe that it is impossible to teach values—any values. It is possible, I believe, to live and practice values, every day in every way, values which students may perceive and emulate and hopefully internalize.

The Sense of Self

Students are too often underestimated by teachers and other educators. They sense prejudices, biases, and shortcomings in teachers. To the extent to which teachers are unaware of their own limitations or are unwilling to admit to them, to that extent they cannot begin to address the task of caring and feeling and relating to students.

Important also is the sense of self which we have as educators. Too often we accept a prevailing view in our society of teachers as "losers." Why and how this view developed and how it affects our profession is an important topic which educators ought to address, and soon.

The point is that we can never, as teachers, do the job we must, if we do not feel good about ourselves and do not understand how and why we feel as we do about others. It is in this spirit that I suggest a few approaches which have worked for me over the years as I have become more and more immersed in the experience—the adventure—of teaching!

1. Expect the unexpected from every student, for it is true that students will increasingly perform at the level of expectation from teachers, parents, peers, and others.

2. Confront squarely instances of prejudice, bias, and discrimination wherever they occur—in the classroom, in the school, or in

the community. Involve students in recognizing and resisting these instances.

3. Accept students as partners in a process where learning to learn is a joint enterprise. In the classroom community students and teacher explore, examine, probe, search, and evaluate key concepts and generalizations in a specific field. Obviously, the teacher has special know-how which enables him or her to make singular contributions, yet students often can play a large and creative role in both the substance and the process of education.

4. Be willing to admit both error and a lack of knowledge. None of us knows everything. To revise, re-evaluate, and even reject ideas, facts, and viewpoints is to participate fully in the process of education. Set an example.

5. Demand the best performance from oneself. Work hard outside the classroom so students can work hard inside the classroom.

6. Praise generously. Everyone, including students, loves to succeed and enjoys positive recognition from older peers.

The Melody Lingers On

"Life is action and passion." And so is learning. To bring life into the classroom is to transcend the narrow limits of subject matter and to embrace the potential of learning in its fullest sense. Stated differently, education of the self is the ultimate objective. Our classrooms can be exciting way-stations on the road to self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-fulfillment. But to make them that way, we must involve students with ourselves in an effort which immediately makes teaching perhaps the most creative and rewarding of all professions.

Substance, process, and action provide a framework in which personal growth and development continue long after immediate day-to-day contact has ended. Knowledge is cultivated, values are imbued and reassessed. And what a lovely harvest! A Black blues singer—Nellie Lutcher—summed it up nicely long ago in the old classic, "the song is ended but the melody lingers on." □

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