Education and Intergroup Relations

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MANY an ephemeral emphasis has come and gone in education. Teachers still active can remember when they were first challenged by the Palmer method of handwriting, the additive method of subtraction, homogeneous grouping, or the Dalton Plan for individualized instruction. For some years after World War I, Teachers College gave courses in how to Americanize the flood of recent immigrants. During depression years some states began to require that their schools give instruction in the Cooperative Movement. Viewing the upsurge, in the past dozen years, of educational articles, pamphlets, films, talks, and workshops on intergroup relations, one might first ask whether this, too, will swiftly run its course as another educational fad— inspired, of course, by the highest motives.

Intergroup or intercultural education—the terms are often used synonymously—is a delayed response to social changes which have been taking place outside the school. Unlike some other innovations it is not primarily a pedagogical proposal, not the creation of some one influential personality, and not a response to a small pressure group. Education in intergroup relations has been forced upon us by some of the most rapid and dynamic social alterations of our time. To forecast the future of this educational enterprise we must study its social base. We may find that our schools have once again come too late with too little.

Mounting evidence of coming changes in the pattern of Negro-white relations in this country led a farsighted Carnegie Corporation under the leadership of Frederick P. Keppel in 1937 to invite the distinguished Swedish social scientist, Gunnar Myrdal, to undertake several years of study of our American dilemma. World War II suddenly intensified the demand for national unity. At the same time Hitler's vicious regime shocked us into awareness of the almost incredible extremes to which prejudice might lead. The accelerated movement of Negro workers into northern cities brought many tensions and occasional riots. A spate of official committees arose, appointed by mayors and governors to try to find ways of improving intergroup relations. Fair employment legislation and court decisions against discriminatory practices introduced further changes. Civic agencies, race organizations, religious congresses and committees, conferences for democracy, research bureaus on human relations, and coordinating councils all concerned with intergroup cooperation arose by scores and hundreds. This social ferment was inevitably felt in education. Curriculum materials were prepared to give children and adolescents a better understanding of the races of mankind and the problems of living together. The Springfield Plan received wide publicity. Rachel Davis DuBois experimented in her Intercultural Education Workshop and other projects, with new techniques for overcoming pupil and teacher ethno-centrism. Articles on intergroup or inter-cultural education appeared in almost every educational journal. Workshops to prepare teachers were organized, some by the National Conference of Christians and Jews, many by local school systems and colleges. The American Council on Education undertook in 1945 a four-year project known as Intergroup Education in Cooperating Schools. Professor Theodore Brameld published in 1946 the results of a year's survey of what various public "schools were doing to meet problems of minority groups. The Bureau for Inter-cultural Education set up a field staff to assist schools in developing stronger programs. Teachers College, from 1948 to 1952, offered special professional training to prospective leaders in the area of intergroup relations.

The social changes are, however, more far-reaching than have been our educational proposals. In the field of race relations, it may be doubted whether any nation at any time in the history of the world has changed established patterns as rapidly as has the United States in the past fifteen years. The war, as seems usually true of wars, only

accelerated a development already well under way. The postwar leadership of the United States in world affairs has made it imperative that all barriers of discrimination against our own citizens of Jewish, Oriental, or Spanish background or of darker skin color, be rooted out if we are to retain moral respect. The Supreme Court decision of 1954 against racial segregation in schools has given added impetus to other related social changes. The probability is that the rate of change in race relations is still rising. Programs designed to help school administrators, teachers, guidance personnel, curriculum makers, pupils, and parents in their adjustment to these changes seem likely to be more rather than less in demand.

If we focus upon religious or social class differences rather than upon race differences, we discover other impressive social changes in progress. Membership in religious organizations increased 34 per cent during the decade from 1940 to 1950, while the population rose only 15 per cent. Sales of religious books have risen much more rapidly than have sales of other non-fiction. The Roman Catholic population has increased notably in some urban sections. A generation ago, New York City was about one-third Catholic; today a majority has at least nominal allegiance to the Catholic faith. The centuries-old struggle between advocates of church-run schools and advocates of secular public schools has been renewed with vigor. A sociological study recently showed that during the decade from 1939 to 1949, controversial items centered upon Catholic-Protestant issues in both America, a Catholic journal, and the Christian Century, a Protestant publication, more than doubled in frequency.[1] The parochial school population in all cities of Massachusetts rose from 32 per cent in 1938 to 44 per cent in 1950, and in a number of cities the students in Catholic parochial schools now outnumber the students in public schools. There is clear evidence in social psychological studies that segregation, whether by religion or by race, tends toward in-group solidarity and a corresponding alienation from or potential hostility toward the out-group.

Social class is not a new phenomenon. More than a century ago it was observed in a noted document that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." The aspiration of many Americans toward a society in which the generally abundant distribution of goods and a high degree of mobility on the occupational ladder should make class differences insignificant has been challenged by such studies as those of Middletown,[2] Deep South,[3] Yankee City,[4] Plainville,[5] Jonesville,[6] and Elmtown.[7] Communities large and small in every section of the country are stratified in ways which affect the life chances of youth. Efforts of educators to help pupils establish friendships across class lines have brought disappointing results, demonstrating the power of community class lines to penetrate the walls of the most democratically oriented schoolrooms.

So long as universal education meant only a few years of the three R's in the elementary school for children from the working classes, class differences did not emerge as a major complication in education. They have achieved prominence today because of our unprecedented social experiment in trying to provide a high school education for "all American youth." Adolescents from urban and rural slum neighborhoods may always have had an acceptance of profane language, overt aggression, and heterosexual relationships which clashed with middle-class norms, but books like Blackboard Jungle weren't written until middle-class teachers, equipped with a curriculum originally designed for a leisure class and with incentives appropriate to middle-class aspirations, found themselves confronted by vigorous young men and women who weren't buying anything of the kind. No other country has ever kept so many of its adolescents for so long in schools; yet in few if any other modern nations does one find such distaste among adults for any activities reported to be "educational" and such virulent anti-intellectualism. If Davis is correct in his assertion[8] that for the one-third of all American children who come from lower lower-class levels, school experience is one long misery of frustration and failure, what must be expected when we undertake to

prolong this devastating encounter through the teen-age years?

This brief review of changing patterns in our society as we attempt integration across race lines, face the implications of communities where only a minority of children attend public schools, and confront a population in high school different from any which secondary education in any country has ever known before, suggests not only a continuing need for study of the role of education in inter-group relations, but also the serious dimensions of our problems.

Some educators have appeared to think of intergroup relations in a superficially social way. They have organized school assembly programs and festivals which reflect approval of various national costumes and customs; they have arranged an exchange of pleasant visits with pupils of another race; they have presented plays and pageants in which arms are linked to symbolize harmonious brotherhood. All well and good. Children's growth must begin where children are. Understanding good-will movements and joining in cooperative group projects are steps in the right direction. But they are tiny steps and not commensurate with the present need.

The sober fact is that the principal threat today to the continued development of public education lies in possible failure to solve major problems of inter-group relations. Legislatures of several states have already enacted laws expressing a determination to abolish public schools rather than desegregate them. Congress seems unable to provide Federal aid to education, however great the need may be, because of the unresolved controversy over public tax aid to parochial schools. Several predominantly Roman Catholic cities of New England have already reduced their per-pupil expenditure in public schools below that of cities in any other section of the country. And only a few weeks ago a group of high school administrators in New York City publicly bemoaned to the Board of Education their inability to conceive a program really suited to those lower-class adolescents who are unresponsive to book learning.

It is our thesis that the methods developed by and associated with intergroup education in the past are inadequate for the grave intergroup dissensions of today. We have shared the error of those who have thought that stopping fights on the playground might help to prevent devastating international atomic wars. We confront profound political struggles, but our techniques have often resembled those of the famous Helen Hokinson club ladies.

Negro-white relations today have passed beyond the stage when some social science units on Negro history or heroes could be thought to do much toward meeting the present predicament. The six-week workshops analyzed by Taba,9 who claims that "people who were considered unchangeable, did change," seem to have been effective mainly in such ways as leading teachers to give more attention to sociometric patterns in their classroom, to plan social activities cutting across racial lines, to give talks to community groups, and to broaden their own circle of friends. These are surely good gains, but they were achieved with selected teachers whose attitudes were favorable before they came to the workshops and who were already committed to projects furthering understanding and cooperation. They tell us little about what to try with Mississippi legislators and their constituencies. Conflict between the Roman Catholic view of education and that which underlies the comprehensive public high school is unlikely to be resolved by the appearance of a priest, a rabbi, and a Protestant clergyman on the same platform during Brotherhood Week.

Barriers to effective communication between middle-class teachers and lower-class pupils and parents may prove even more resistant than barriers between Negroes and white people of similar social class.

Perhaps it would be well to re-examine the procedures which have been successful in a modest way in the best existing programs of education for intercultural cooperation. Are these techniques good enough that an extension of them to more pupils for more of the time might be expected to make a substantial impact upon the basic conflicts

which divide our society and threaten sometimes to destroy public education itself? Or do the present cleavages of class, religion, and race call for more drastic changes in our educational approach? Let us consider three specific questions.

1. What, if anything, can schools and colleges now do which might well transform white racists—not all of whom, by any means, live in the South—who find the thought of Negro and white children sitting side by side in a kindergarten circle or joining as youths in a folk-dancing evening so intolerable?

2. What, if anything, can schools and colleges now do which might bring a meeting of minds between those who, in deep conviction, believe that religious tolerance, mutual respect of vocational groups, and the foundations for democratic living can best be built in a unified public school, and those who, in equally deep conviction, believe that education must be expressly integrated with what they regard as the revealed and final truth about God's Will for man? Out of centuries of bloody religious conflict have we learned any promising approaches?

3. What, if anything, can schools and colleges now do which might be expected to integrate the young roughnecks of the working class, the neat and repressed paragons of the middle class, and the condescending offspring of the privileged ruling coterie into one community of understanding and cooperation?

We may not achieve adequate answers but we shall surely transcend any shallow and trivial view of intergroup relations which might leave us complacent about what is being done in our very best schools of today. We shall have to talk, not about modest additions to our present program, but about basic transformations of our curriculum, our processes of teacher selection, and the whole conception of public education. We shall be considering rather less what goes on in classrooms with children, and more the forces which today mold mass and elite adult attitudes and tip the balance of political power. We shall be thinking, in appraising the impact of an institution like Teachers College, not about a special department or offering in intergroup relations, but about the need of all educational leaders for reorientation and for skills of statesmanship. The disparity between the dimensions of our previous programs and our present problems is formidable.

1 J. J. Kane, "Protestant-Catholic Tensions." American Sociological Review. 16: 663-72. 1951.
2 R. S. Lynd and H.M. Lynd, Middletown (New York, Harcourt Brace, 1929); Middletown in Transition (Harcourt Brace, 1937).
3 Allison Davis, B.B. Gardner, and M.R. Gardner, Deep South (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1941). See also John Bollard, Caste and Class in a Southern Town (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1937).
4 W. Lloyd Warner, and P.S. Lunt, The Social Life of a Modern Community (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1941).
5 James West (pseud.), Plainville, U.S.A. (New York, Columbia University Press, 1945).
6 W. Lloyd Warner, Democracy in Jonesville (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1949).
7 A. B. Hollingshead, Elmtown's Youth (New York, John Wiley and Sons, 1950).
8 Allison Davis, Social-Class Influences Upon Learning (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1948).
9 Hilda Taba, Leadership Training in Intergroup Education (Washington, D. G, American Council on Education, 1953).