

IMPROVING SOCIAL LEARNINGS—Our Hope for Ending Social Discriminations

One realistic answer to the problem of social discriminations lies in improving the social learnings of boys and girls. This article is a sensitive interpretation of ways in which children can be assisted in relating themselves to one another and to their world in the secure, accepting, satisfying, challenging setting of school and community.

But we are beginning to realize that it is not thing-poverty and fact-ignorance alone that makes the difference. . . . It is something closer to ones body and the people one loves (or fails to love) and as distant as God that drives one man to bind himself to his human world and another to keep slashing at his ties.¹

THE PROBLEMS OF social discrimination—unfair treatment and thwarted human relationships between the peoples of one's family or hometown or nation or the world must surely have early beginnings in the lives of those who discriminate or who are discriminated against. Certainly long before Napoleon and Hitler attempted to bring the world under the power of their control or before Florence Nightingale and Albert Schweitzer began extending themselves in service to their fellowmen, each in his own way was

learning ways of understanding himself and relating to others. If we could know the influences which operate in individuals' lives that produce such widely differing human relations we could be more secure in our direction of the nurture and guidance of our children and youth.

Any group of children brought together will have its usual and unusual problems of social learnings—likenesses and differences, agreements and disagreements. There may be the child who is too little or too big, the little girl with stringy hair and no belt for her dress, the boy who cries every time he is hurt, the child who "can't" get dirty, the one whose father is in prison or whose mother is promiscuous. Or it may be the child who is new to the school who for so long remains silent, or children who fight or who cannot defend themselves, those who call each other names, and those who talk too much or not enough. There may be those who have come to feel unworthy or too important because of the ways they can play, or read, or speak, or

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¹ Lillian Smith, *The Journey, The World* Publishing Co., 1954, p. 159.

dress. It may be the one or ones who are different in color or nationality or speech or religion. These and dozens of other needs and differences are the business of social learnings and must be woven into the daily living of children in such ways that children's self-confidence is built and fine feelings are developed toward others.

Achieving Self Acceptance

The school along with the home stands in a strategic place in our culture to help fulfill these responsibilities. In no other institution are brought together so many and varied needs and potentials. Where else but in the schools can all children have the environment to support and accept their differences, mistakes, successes, failures? Who more than the teacher should and can understand the ways to help each child enhance the self and fulfill the expectancies of society?

While the picture lacks much being complete we do have impressive evidence from many sources which indicates that certain basic conditions attending the social learnings which children achieve affect the quality of their human relations. The research and writings of Karen Horney, H. S. Sullivan, Arthur T. Jersild, and Gardner Murphy point out that only the person who learns to accept himself can establish positive friendly relations with others.

Only when a child is cared for and wanted can he share affection and attention with others. Only as he achieves a satisfied feeling of competence can he work and play with others toward the success of cooperative group understandings.

Feelings Affect Relations

We are beginning to understand also that an individual's responses to life experiences and other people are learned through the feeling tones accompanying those experiences. In their report of a study of children's intercultural relations Trager and Yarrow say:

They (the children) learned attitudes in a group situation in which they found many satisfactions. In it they were accepted and they accepted the leader who exemplified consistently the values to be learned. In accepting the group situation and the leader, the child was disposed also to accept the values of the new culture.²

Whether children are learning property rights or how to take responsibility or to protest the authority of a bully or to get one's way by name calling or to play fairly with one-another they are building feelings into their relationships with others.

With these basic conditions in mind it seems appropriate to search for some ways to apply them in the school living of children. In overview three ideas are suggested:

Feeling tones are important as children learn the ways to treat others fairly.

Adults are needed as children gain their social learnings.

When the purposes are important enough individuals with wide differences can constructively focus their interests and energy on cooperative ventures.

² Helen G. Trager and Marian Radke Yarrow, *They Learn What They Live*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952. p. 352.

Feeling Tones Are Important as One Learns the Ways To Treat Others Fairly



Learning to care what happens to others and to express and extend helpfulness grows through many experiences. At first the experiences are with those who are close and dear because they are our own. Then they extend to others who are not so near but because they need human sympathy and help and understanding—as we do—we learn to care.

"And feeling close to my fellow-beings and to the earth, I gave sympathy to other living creatures as naturally as a child breathes."³



As children learn to make and live by rules and agreements so are they gaining know-how to insure fair treatment for others.



Taking responsibility comes naturally when one is depended on for a job that is important to him.



Having fun together helps people like each other better.

³ Lillian Smith, *The Journey*, The World Publishing Company, 1954. p. 76.

Adults Are Needed



To provide experiences that are important enough to include all.



To give support and help as one gives up some of one's own way.



To push out the bounds of provincial community living.



To help analyze situations, predict potential dangers, and examine values.



To help children learn the ways of group living and working.

Many factors must enter into the living to help children grow and gain their social learnings. Certain positive changes come when adults care about children and understand them.

Teachers can help children understand the meanings of their experiences—analyzing problems, relationships and feelings, discovering and using the resources within and without the group.

When The Purposes Are Important Enough One's Interest and Energy Are Focused



—On the work.



—On the game to play.



—On the product in the making.

The differences of people are many and varied. Some of these differences have long been the dividing forces that resulted in confused, distorted feelings and behaviors. We are learning though that through involvement in commonly shared problems, interests, and concerns individuals can come together. When the job at hand is important people can learn to pool their energies. They can find ways to build on and make use of the potentials of each individual through cooperative interaction.

Thus interacting individuals furnish the environment in which to bring forward their creative meanings, thereby giving each the opportunity to become a better self.⁴

It is the teacher's role to help children have interesting, purposeful experiences through which they may build into their feelings and behavior respect for the values of their own differences and those of others through cooperative ventures.

As we search for the ways for ending social discriminations we all feel discouraged at times. A long look at the progress that has been made can give perspective for facing today's problems. An examination of promising developments can give strength and confidence.

Human slavery, divine rights of kings, church domination of nations of people, the feudal system are some examples of human controls which have been largely discarded by men. We still struggle with prejudices, mis-

⁴L. T. Hopkins, *The Emerging Self in Home and School*, Harper and Brothers, 1954, p. 189.

placed sentiments and group pressures, but there are promising developments. Certainly never before were so many people concerned about those who have not enough to eat, not a place to live, and not work to earn either. The United Nations is one evidence of concern to find cooperative ways to settle the problems between nations and to protect those who may not be receiving fair treatment.

There is a growing understanding of the meanings of human behavior, of the intricacies of relationships between individuals and groups of people, of the impact of the forces operating in our own and other cultures.

As the schools help children and youth grow in self-understanding, adequacy, and respect for others they contribute to developing the kind of people who can lift the level of human relations. As we grow in sensitivity to the feeling tones accompanying children's social learnings we can be more supportive of the problems of children's relations. If we believe that when purposes are important enough individuals with wide differences can constructively use their interests and energy on cooperative ventures then we will continue to search for and use

experiences growing out of the real concerns of children.

As social learnings are gained in human environments that build the self and extend constructive relations with others, so can we hope to move toward ending social discriminations.

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