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Problems Teachers Face while Teaching in Mixed Racial and Ethnic Classrooms

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A REPORT

PRESENTED TO
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BY
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PROBLEMS TEACHERS FACE

(While teaching in mixed racial and ethnic classrooms.)

One of the first conflicts between peoples is recorded in Genesis 11, verses six through nine.

"And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.

And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.

So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.

Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth."

God taught us an important lesson: when communication stops, progress is halted. Today as then, differences not understood and a lack of communication can cause a stopping of progress.

In today's world of change, the classroom becomes the only true melting pot of our nation. As more and more peoples are brought together, the need for teachers who are able to function in such situations, becomes greater and greater. There can be no hard and fast rules for the handling of

situations since the number of possible problems and occurrences surrounding them is infinite; but it must be realized that the only way a teacher or any other person can cope with such problems is to understand them.

The capable teacher of today or any other day, must understand the problems which affect her and her pupils, know their roots, and in short, be able to understand the character of the problems she encounters. Many of these problems are involved with the differences that arise as a result of ethnic and racial backgrounds. But before the problems can be understood, the terms used in explaining the problems and their solutions, must be understood.

First, examine the meaning of the term 'ethnic group'. "Almost anyone who uses the term would say that it is a group distinguishable from others by some combination of the following: physical characteristics, language, religion, customs, institutions, or 'cultural traits.' This definition is, however, exactly wrong-end to. Its wrongness has important consequences, not only for study of inter-group relations, but for the relations themselves. An ethnic group is not one because of the degree of measurable or observable difference from other groups; it is an ethnic group, on the contrary, because the people in it and the people out of it know it is one; because both the ins and the outs feel and act as if it were a separate group. This is possible only if there are ways of telling who belongs to the group and who does not, and if a person learns early, deeply, and strongly to what group he belongs, it is usually irrevocable.

If it is easy to resign from the group, it is not truly an ethnic group."¹

"To America have come persons from every corner of the globe. The great melting-pot, as we have often considered ourselves, is indeed made up of a heterogeneous collection of the world's many cultures and types. But the melting-pot has not really succeeded in melting everyone down to one common denominator. Many such differences not only remain but are crucial in the life history of almost all of us.

'Racial' distinctions are among the most difficult to deal with and to overcome because they are more easily seen. And racial differences in America are associated with differences in status and in access to many opportunities."²

"Some of the difficulty with the term 'race' arises from the fact that people do not make the proper distinction between that which is biological and hereditary on the one hand, and that which is learned and acquired, on the other.

Many sociologists feel that the word 'race' is too vague and misleading, and have chosen to employ such terms as

¹Everett Cherrington Hughes and Helen MacGill Hughes, Where Peoples Meet (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1952), p. 156.

²Jean D. Grambs and L. Morris McClure, Foundations of Teaching (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1964), p. 75.

'minorities', 'nationalities', 'ethnic groups', and the like."³

"In school, the impact of differences depends primarily upon the teacher, does it not? And teachers, like people, have been reared in the American culture. We have research evidence that indicates that teachers, too, have feelings about the differences their students bring to school.

"Teachers need to understand these differences, to understand their own feelings about them, and to seek ways of helping young people learn to live with and value such differences.

"Although currently considerable attention is being given to the idea of developing a true 'culture pluralism' which accords to all groups respect for their differences, the American social scene still demonstrated the melting-pot approach to differences: everyone is to try to be as much like everyone else as he can--at least in outward appearance and public behavior. Thus, the individual whose ethnic origin is apparent, because of his appearance or his name, is often unhappy. Such persons face discrimination in many areas of American life.

"Children of Foreign-born parents make up an important group in many of the major cities of America. Although all Americans except the American Indians are assumed to be originally immigrants, there are distinct differences depending, first, on how long ago this migration occurred, and second,

³Brewton Berry, Race and Ethnic Relations (second edition; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), p. 36.

from the part of the globe the migration occurred. An Englishman, whether of early or recent residence, finds it relatively easy to be absorbed into the American stream: his language is the same, he soon loses most of his accent, and his name is indistinguishable from those of millions of others. But if his country of origin is China, or Greece, or Puerto Rico, then the differences become quite crucial. These countries have a distinctive and different culture. These cultures differ markedly from the American and Anglo-Saxon in many ways--food habits, religion, family patterns, language. Sometimes there are differences in physical appearance. At one time, when America was new, it was very important that such differences be resolved in order to build a distinctive and strong America. Yet, as we examine our history, we find that much of our strength derives from this very cultural diversity. In fact, there is no place in American life that has not been touched and enriched by cultures of many countries."⁴

With a basic definition of terms and a realization that thorough understanding is the only path to solutions, the next step is to examine closely some specific problems and solutions that have been or possibly could be used to bring about greater understanding, acceptance, and harmonious living. Only a few but relatively basic problems will be considered.

⁴Grambs and McClure, op. cit., pp.75-76.

Prejudice is "an attitude with an emotional bias."⁵
 "Everyone of us, in the process of socialization, acquires attitudes, not only toward the racial and ethnic groups with which we come into contact, but toward all the elements of our environment. Usually, however, when we speak of 'race Prejudice', we are thinking, not of friendly attitudes but of unfriendly attitudes."⁶

Social discrimination or prejudice may cause certain groups to regard themselves as superior or inferior to other groups. How can a teacher eliminate the labeling of some groups with titles such 'dumb like all nigers', 'cheap like a Jew', 'lazy as an indian', or even 'stuck-up Yankee'?

First, consider the expert's reports on the differances in IQ's of different ethnic groups. "The results of the intelligence tests, so flattering to some ethnic groups and so disparaging to others, have not gone unchallenged. For example, it is pointed out that not all the groups tested have the same facility with the language of the tests. Some people are bilingual; and while the ability to speak two languages equally well is certainly a valuable accomplishment, it is definitely a handicap when one is taking an intelligence test."⁷

⁵Louis Wirth, "Race and Public Policy," The Scientific Monthly, Vol. 58 (1944), p. 303.

⁶Berry, op. cit., p. 370.

⁷Otto Klineberg, Characteristics of the American Negro. p. 35.

Many Negroes of America speak English poorly. Some children could not give the opposite of certain words because it was later found, they didn't know the meaning of the word 'opposite'. "In various other ways subtle and unsuspected differences in the cultural background of those tested affect the scores made. Among some peoples speed is highly valued and time is regarded as a precious commodity; but there are groups which place a negative value upon speed and are hardly time conscious at all. In short, cultural differences, values, and experiences have a definite effect upon the performance on a test. Furthermore if groups are to be compared it is essential that they be equally motivated and that they approach the test in the same frame of mind. Now competition and rivalry are well established in our culture, and children soon learn that it is highly desirable that they excell theri fellows. It is not so with all peoples."⁸

Teachers must be aware of this in the classroom situation. No hard and fast rule can be stated, but she must analyze her students and try to lend motivation in the needed direction to those lacking it. The following are some observations which may be of help in understanding IQ and motivation.

"1. Races and racial and ethnic groups possibly do differ in innate ability. Group differences do invariably appear in any measurable characteristic.

2. It can hardly be denied that there are significant psychological differences between racial and ethnic groups. The numerous life histories, the reports of the ethnologists, and the studies of 'national character' all point in

⁸Berry, op. cit., pp. 73-74.

that direction. Groups do have many of the characteristics with which they are popularly charged, such as aggressiveness, mediocrity, shiftlessness and so on. Stereotypes are not entirely without foundation.

3. Differences, however, are always matters of degree, and not of kind.

4. Differences are slight, and on the average.

5. Overlappings far outweigh the differences.

6. Most of the differences are not innate, but are almost certainly the product of historical and environmental factors."⁹

How can the public school successfully handle problems relating to religion in a culturally mixed class?

"The National Council of the Churches of Christ compiled figures in 1963 which showed a total church membership in this country of more than 116 million."¹⁰ One third of all church members were Roman Catholic and almost one half were Protestants. In addition were 2.7 million Eastern Orthodox and 5.5 million Jewish, as well as an undetermined number of non-Christian denominations.¹¹ "There are many moments in public school life when religious questions are raised. What about Christmas programs? Shall a team pray for victory? Can a biology teacher teach evolution to a fundamentalist? How are the beliefs of Christian Scientists to be respected

⁹Berry, op. cit., p. 77.

¹⁰Grambs and McClure, op. cit., p. 75.

¹¹New York World Telegram and The Sun, The World Almanac, 1963, p. 705.

when a doctor talks to a class about the germ basis of some illnesses?"¹² These are questions that can only be answered by each teacher in her own situation. Most generally, the administration will have a definite stand, and the teacher will be forced to abide by it, but otherwise, she should consider each student and then arrive at the solution best for her and her class.

Among the aspects of culture which facilitate assimilation, none is the equal of language. So important is language, both as the carrier of culture and as the tool for acquiring a culture, that many sociologists regard statistics on the mother tongue as the best index of a group's assimilation."¹³ Realizing this, what effect is created when children of an ethnic or racial group that is characterized by an 'accent' are mixed with others, and how can these problems be overcome?

There are three areas of language that will come into play here: speaking, understanding, and writing abilities. Of these, the first two are concerned with a third area which is that of social contacts with peers.

As was previously mentioned in connection with IQ, students of a bilingual background are often hindered on tests and are placed in 'slow groups' which may cause a decrease in motivation. There is an example from Tucson of how one school there faced and overcame this problem.

¹² Grambs and McClure, loc. cit.

¹³ Lowry Nelson, "Speaking of Tongues," American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 54, No. 3 (November, 1948), p. 202ff.

Children come to school from Spanish language background and are thrown into an English learning situation. Because they cannot compete, they are placed in slow groups, where feelings of inferiority grow, and shame in culture and background are likely to develop. Learning is prohibited! Bilingual teachers are hired for bilingual classrooms where Spanish bridges the gap of understanding and communication. Spanish language faults are corrected, and English listening posts are used to speed fluency and correct usage. Oral communication was high and confidence and pride was emphasized.¹⁴

Action such as this may be the answer in some schools where bilingualism is a problem. The schools must be prepared to face such problems and handle them since the schools exist for the benefit of the students and not vice-versa. Once the communication barriers that hinder the student in the scholastic area are crumbling, the social barriers will begin to fall. If the teacher can also help the students to be proud of their ability to speak two languages, group pride and self-confidence will be natural out-growths.

For the teacher who is not afraid of challenge, not afraid to try to understand, not afraid to go out-of-the-way to love, these and many other problems can be solved and she may find a very rewarding place in the ethnically and racially mixed classroom.

¹⁴Maria Urquides, and others. "Aquí Se Habla Español and English, Tucson's Tale of Two Cultures," National Educators Association Journal, LVI (February, 1967), pp. 62, 88, and 89.

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