

From

A Class Divided: Then
and Now

- William Peters, 1987

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FOREWORD

"You have to be taught to hate" was once a fashionable phrase. It seemed to be a key to how to protect American children from the virus of racial prejudice. It follows from this thinking that if children are not taught to reject others or to accept discrimination directed against others who differ from themselves in such superficial characteristics as skin color, then they will be free of the social and psychological burdens of racism. The educational implication of this optimistic perspective is that children can be taught to develop and express sensitive concerns for the hopes, anxieties, and humanity of others. This would be an important contribution to the success of the civil rights movement.

Unfortunately, it has become increasingly clear that in a society in which racism is pervasive, it is easier to teach children prejudices than to teach sensitivity for other human

beings. One would have expected that after the U.S. Supreme Court stated in its historic *Brown* decision of May 1954 that racially segregated schools violated the equal protection clause of the United States Constitution, and psychologically damaged the victims of such organized racism, educational institutions would be in the forefront, leading American children away from racism. However, this was not to be. The resistance of many public officials, school boards, parents, and educators to effective desegregation of our public schools revealed the depth and extent of racism in American society. The fact that desegregated schools could provide an opportunity for educators to teach children to accept others and to understand the commonality of their fellow human beings was denied by the persistence of racism. Rather, the continued racial organization of public schools made this critical educational institution a vehicle for the perpetuation of racism and the damaging of human beings. While educators for the most part did not directly teach our children to be cruel to others who differed in skin color, their silence and rationalizations made them accessories to the continued hostilities of children who were taught by their parents to resist school desegregation.

The evidence from Jane Elliott's "discrimination day" experiment and William Peters' documentation of the results in his book *A*

Class Divided, Then and Now are most significant in demonstrating that it is possible to counter the teaching of hatred by having children experience and understand the deep hurt inevitably associated with discrimination and rejection by others. This understanding came as a result of requiring the children to experience rejection themselves, a necessary first step, it seems, in communicating this type of human sensitivity. It took a great deal of courage and commitment for Jane Elliott, the teacher, to assume the risks of even temporary trauma to her students and of stated or unstated resentment on the part of parents and fellow teachers. But the results and follow-up appear to have justified these risks.

A most notable finding from this social experiment was that the positive influence on these children was not temporary. Jane Elliott and William Peters had the fortunate opportunity to meet with the former students and discuss their values and perspectives fourteen years after the original experience. These former students revealed that their attitudes, sensitivity, and social maturity remained intact. Even though they experienced this type of disturbing role-playing as third-graders for only a few days and direct or indirect negative racial attitudes and counterforces were a continuing part of their environment, having experienced personal hurt and rejection continued to have a positive effect on their ability to empathize

with others. This demonstration of the resilience of normal human beings indicates that it is possible for social institutions, particularly schools, to educate children away from hatred and cruelty toward others. It is also significant that in developing positive attitudes and self-esteem, the children were able to demonstrate positive academic achievement. They not only developed respect for others, they also expressed a dynamic self-respect.

Jane Elliott's replication of the experiment with adult employees of the Iowa Department of Corrections leaves a number of questions that should be pursued. The employees were subjected to a clearly artificial situation for a half-day. They were not subjected to the authority of a teacher. In spite of these facts, their reactions were not unlike those of the third-graders. Those who were told they were inferior resented being discriminated against. Those who were told that they were superior and given privileges relished even this temporary and artificial status. It is not known to what extent this short training session influenced their racial attitudes.

Jane Elliott's work with young children, the follow-up, and the training sessions with adults demonstrate that it is possible for schools—educational and social institutions—to socialize and educate normal human beings away from racial hostilities and rejection. With understanding and commitment, it is possible to de-

velop and implement a sequential educational program that can contribute to the attainment of this humane goal. Freeing human beings from the burdens of rejection and cruelty directed toward others and freeing the victims from the consequences of hatred and rejection are most important goals for education. Educators who are concerned and mature enough to share these goals with Jane Elliott and William Peters can develop a systematic educational program toward the attainment of genuine human values:

- In their training and preparation, teachers can and must be taught the foundations, significance, and educational value of human and race relations. It is not enough that teachers be certified in terms of their mastery of subject matter and teaching methods. They must also understand the relationship between cognitive skills and human understanding and acceptance. They must be able to communicate and teach these humane values to their students not only by their words but also by their actions.
- The Jane Elliott experiment and methods could be modified for use at various educational levels—elementary, middle, and high schools.
- Subject matter and disciplines in colleges and specialization in professional schools could be taught as an integral part of human sensitivity.

A major, an inescapable goal of educational institutions is to broaden the perspective of human beings—to develop a truly functional empathy—to free human beings from the constrictions of ignorance, superstition, hostility, and other forms of inhumanity. Jane Elliott's contribution, as described in William Peters' *A Class Divided, Then and Now* demonstrates that it is possible to educate and produce a class of human beings united by understanding, acceptance, and empathy.

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