**UNDERSTANDING PREJUDICE THROUGH INSTRUCTIONAL USE OF**

**CONTRAST IN THE CLASSROOM**

The purpose of this project is to offer a method that provides the child an opportunity to examine the nature of prejudice and its potential consequences. The importance of implementing such an approach in the elementary school lies in the child’s inability to reason independently from the attitudes and opinions of those around him. All too often the child’s values become twisted reflecting the bias of adult dictates without realizing the reasons for the behavior and without any awareness of its consequences. This social conditioning is truly a tragedy whenever it plays a decisive role in the way he selects and arranges his thoughts.

One way of counteracting this trend would be to develop an approach that would create a prejudicial environment. This would allow the children the opportunity to experience and comprehend prejudicial statements and observe how their values and behavior can be manipulated. To do this a classroom setting can be utilized giving the children the opportunity to react to and examine prejudice on a level compatible with their development. In this way the children would experience for themselves the resulting emotional frustrations of prejudice and thus become more acutely aware of its problems.

The criteria for the conflict utilized in this experiment was the children’s belief in the American Creed (brotherhood and equality) as expressed by Gunnar Hydal in his work An American Dilemma.

The catalyst that induce this behavioral reaction was an imposed prejudicial environment that would deliberately produce a complete re-orientation of values among the students. A conflict was created among my thirty-three sixth grade students when I categorized them into shades (non-black haired students) and those having black hair. By attributing positive qualities to the black haired children I was able to establish a feeling of inferiority among the shades. As this situation progressed a closer association was made between the implied bias and the physical trait of hair color. As the prejudicial situation intensified the children’s ability to reason diminished and strong emotional behavior began to surface. The more they responded with emotional behavior the more they expressed feelings of frustration and anger.

Once this was achieved the children were in a better position to objectively begin a process of analytical thought, reflecting upon the conflicts and dilemmas that that active experience produced. It is during this critical period of reconciliation that the children’s hostility receded allowing them to analyze what caused the conflict. As they re-constructed their reactions to the experiment they began to notice how their beliefs could be manipulated by systematically creating blind spots in their thinking from which point their emotion began to dominate. (For example, giving up a friend because of a physical trait). It was through artful diplomacy that the teacher directed the students to reflect and examine those times when illogical behavior superseded thoughtful action.

In summary, one can look upon the class disturbance as that incident which applied Bruner’s concept of contrast within the dimension of Dewy’s experience and thinking. The period involving emotionalism was intended to provide the active part of the experience, one that would set conditions similar to the difficulties of everyday life. By creating an environment in conflict with the children’s values, they were encouraged to use their resources in challenging this new problem. The purpose of the conflict was to force a situation in which their behavior would produce consequences that interfered with their ability to reason.

When their emotionalism became more fully controlled, they were able to relate their accrued feelings to the context of the experience. As the instructor aided them in finding these points, new evaluations were made. It was here that the fifth and final level of Dewey’s process of “opportunity and occasion to test… ideas by application, to make their meaning clear and to discover…their validity”.

In the final analysis, it was the teacher who presented positive direction in which the students questioned past prejudicial beliefs and attitudes, examined their validity, and came to terms with a new understanding and a heightened consciousness. By objectively viewing the course of action that was dominated by emotional behavior the child would hopefully be able to respond to discriminatory statements more effectively. In short the success of the project rests in the child’s ability to produce positive thinking skills to take precedence over the illogic of discrimination.