Toward a Common Destiny

Is prejudice inevitable in America? Can young people learn tolerance and respect, instead of misunderstanding and hatred?

At a 1993 conference held under the auspices of the Common Destiny Alliance and supported by Carnegie Corporation, leading scholars in the behavioral and social sciences grappled with these and other questions. Their focus was on current research: what has been proven about the sources of prejudice and which strategies can work to prevent and ameliorate its poisonous impact.

Toward a Common Destiny: Improving Race and Ethnic Relations in America, edited by Willis D. Hawley and Anthony W. Jackson (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 496 pp., $45.00), grew out of that conference. A collection of seventeen papers, it presents the most up-to-date knowledge about the problem of racial and ethnic prejudice in the United States and identifies ways that individuals and organizations can act to reduce intolerance and discrimination. The book is written from a scholarly point of view, combining theoretical and developmental perspectives with studies of effective practices. Its insights may be especially useful to researchers in pointing out an agenda for scientific inquiry, to educators and employers seeking to improve intergroup relations, and to decision makers who now have a more reliable basis for making wise social policy.

Admirably, *Toward a Common Destiny* is unusually coherent for a collection of essays written by experts in disparate fields. Hawley, a professor of education at the University of Maryland, and Jackson, a program officer at Carnegie Corporation, both express the hope that their volume will rekindle research interest in this field, which has dwindled since the early 1980s -- mainly due to a lack of government and foundation commitment and funding.

In the 1990s, a generation after the Watts Riots and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, race relations are once again a national preoccupation as renewed debate over discrimination and affirmative action rages, and journalists and experts churn out popular books with widely differing views. But as Jackson cautions: "One of the concerns we have is that the discussion of race and ethnic relations be based on knowledge -- not just opinions or anecdotes." Serious study of racial and ethnic bias among young people is of urgent interest because of a growing tendency toward violence in the schools. Conflicts, as Jackson explains, "are exacerbated by the accessibility of weaponry."

America still seems to be a place where the skin color of people is of more interest than what Martin Luther King, Jr., labeled the "content of their character." As a report published by the National Academy of Sciences notes, "The status of black Americans today can best be characterized as a glass that is half full -- if measured by progress since 1939 -- or as a glass that is half empty -- if measured by the persisting disparities between black and white Americans since the early 1970s."**¢**

Hawley echoes: "There's no question that things are getting better . . . but we still have a long way to reach our goal."

Developmental Processes in Children

What is known about how prejudice is acquired? Is it basic to human nature? How do young children pick up messages about people different from themselves? When are the key moments when young people are most open to positive messages about others?

Unfortunately, as Hawley remarks, there is nothing as simple as a vaccine to innoculate children against prejudice. For children, learning to differentiate among objects and to categorize is essential in cognitive development and perhaps, in ancient times, was necessary for survival. From a young age, as they learn the differences between "floor" and "ceiling" or "table'' and "chair," they can also learn to distinguish between "us" and "them." Those first distinctions can be the roots of stereotypic thinking.

But as research demonstrates, there is a positive aspect, too. With early intervention, children can learn to be more "inclusive" in their categorizations. Studies show that the continuous exposure of young children, under favorable conditions, to people who differ from each other in language, culture, or ethnic origins can be influential in countering negative bias. Such positive interactions encourage children to feel greater empathy and to overlook unwarranted distinctions. Parents as well as teachers can play a key role in modeling such positive attitudes.

Hawley notes that most programs that start from the premise that "promoting positive relations among young children has positive consequences" are effective. However, only a limited number of such programs now exist, so that the chances of any but a few children benefiting from them are presently quite low.

Adolescence and Identity Formation

In the developmental chain from early childhood to adolescence, the possibilities multiply for both learning and intensifying prejudice. In fact, adolescence is the critical time for the formation of racial and ethnic identity. Influenced by parents, teachers, peers, and the media, individuals challenge views they internalized earlier, form opinions, make decisions, and may altogether reshape the way they perceive themselves, the world, and their futures.

In an illuminating chapter, "Race, Ethnicity, and the Defiance of Categories," linguistic anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath of Stanford University illustrates how racial and ethnic identification is not clear-cut for many urban youngsters. The young people she interviewed recognize "diversities within diversity"; they see themselves as "of color" or "kinda' all ethnic."

Although some educators believe that group differences should be minimized to reduce tensions, others believe that such an approach is unlikely to foster true "color blindness" and that it is healthier for adolescents to be anchored in an understanding and appreciation of their ethnic and racial background. As Jackson points out, a dialogue between cultures is more authentic when every group is aware of its own culture.

But recognizing the importance of strong racial and ethnic identification raises a paradox: How can parents and educators encourage the development of a strong racial and ethnic identity, with the accompanying feelings of pride, connectedness, and self-respect, that does not result in the denigration of other races and groups?

How can ethnicity be supported without encouraging intergroup tensions? How can young people be helped through this sensitive and complicated quandary?

As the contributors point out, there are some answers -- or the beginnings of answers -- but much additional research is needed. As suggested, meaningful intergroup contact on an ongoing basis is the key to positive identification with a particular group and to improved relations with other groups. Single meetings that have more to do with expressing feelings than with working together are not effective, and can even backfire.

Cooperative Learning and Multicultural Education

One technique that does work is cooperative learning. Proven successful in reducing prejudice as well as improving students' academic achievement, cooperative learning emphasizes teamwork. Within small, diverse groups that meet regularly to work on joint projects, group members share equal status and get to know one another as individuals, with friendship an additional benefit. Social contacts, whether in extracurricular school activities, like athletics, or in community-based programs, can also provide young people opportunities for highquality cross-race contacts.

Other findings demonstrate gains from school programs that promote the "ideology of multiculturalism" -- not just for minority youth but for all. If "multicultural competence" is to be a goal of education, what, exactly, does multiculturalism refer to? In general usage, it has become a catch-all term for acceptance of cultures that stand outside of the mainstream. In his chapter, "Multicultural Education and the Modification of Students' Racial Attitudes," James A. Banks, professor of education and director of the Center for Multicultural Education at the University of Washington, Seattle, offers a lucid definition of multicultural education: "A restructuring and transformation of the total school environment so that it reflects the racial and cultural diversity that exists within U.S. society and helps children from diverse groups to experience educational equality."

More than just curricular reform, multicultural education involves using content from a variety of cultures as illustrations in every subject area, teaching students how knowledge is created and influenced, encouraging the development of democratic attitudes and values, and employing techniques to facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse backgrounds.

Much depends on the teachers. To engage their students in cooperative learning, they need specialized training: to address the needs of a diverse student population, teachers need to be multiculturally literate. As Kenneth Zeichner, professor of teacher education at the University of Wisconsin, writes in his essay, "Preparing Educators for Cross-Cultural Teaching," very little is being done to prepare teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students. He charges that teacher education for diversity necessitates significant change at the teacher training institutes.

In the book's final section, Hawley and four other contributors collaborate to present a set of thirteen principles of program design, to be used either to evaluate existing programs or as guidelines for creating new ones. The first principle, which Hawley emphasizes, is that context means a lot. Strategies should address both institutional and individual sources of prejudice in the situations in which participants live, learn, and work.

Other principles emphasize the importance of the involvement of those in authority, careful training, the inclusion and consideration of all racial and ethnic groups, and ongoing evaluation of outcomes.

More Questions for Research

Editors Hawley and Jackson, along with all of the contributing scholars, assert the need for ongoing, serious research to create a solid foundation for new programs to foster positive intergroup relations. Most of the important studies are now fifteen years old and require updating to take into consideration societal changes. Significantly, much previous research focuses on black-white relations, without addressing multicultural identities and settings.

Aspiring "to achieve a common destiny worth striving for," Jackson focuses the research agenda on young people and opportunities in school and other places they frequent. He believes there is much to be learned from young people themselves about how they have already found ways to get along with others. "It's important to draw lessons from them," he explains, "and not just impose on them."

What patterns of contact already exist, and how can they be replicated on larger scales? Why are some children more successful than others in developing complex, integrated identities? What is the impact of the environment? How can a holistic approach to effective educational policy be designed? Can intergroup relations be improved without also addressing the basic economic and social inequalities of American society? In his essay, Jackson targets several priority areas for future research: curriculum, school organization, teacher development, student assessment, school governance, and the involvement of parents and community leaders.

Both Hawley and Jackson express optimism about chances for positive change. "It's inevitable," Jackson says, "that people from diverse backgrounds will need to be involved and engaged with each other. . . . New strategies can be crafted to create good relations. There's nothing on the horizon that makes it seem that negative outcomes are inevitable." Hawley agrees, adding: "There's no question if we put any effort into it, things would get better."

Jackson's own experience as an adolescent underlines his hopeful point of view. Growing up in California, he encountered "culture shock" when he switched from elementary school -- which was 95 percent African-American -- to middle school -- which was 95 percent Anglo-American. That he quickly formed friendships, which proved to be long-lasting, with students from different cultures made him realize that conflicts were avoidable. "There's got to be a way to have cross-cultural positive relationships extended on a larger scale."

The Corporation, Jackson explains, is considering initiating a program of grantmaking to stimulate new research in intergroup relations focusing on children and adolescents. It may try to develop collaborations with foundations and government agencies to stimulate both research and program development.

As several contributors to *Toward a Common Destiny* maintain, the dearth ofresearch and the indifference of policymakers to what is known about the formation of racial attitudes is foolhardy. Much is at stake. In the year 2020, about 46 percent of the nation's school-age youths will be of color. Understanding the origins of bias and working to eliminate it -- breaking the cycle of distrust, prejudice, and violence -- may determine whether the nation is strengthened or its very fabric is torn.

-- Sandee Brawarsky

For information:
Anthony W. Jackson, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and Willis D. Hawley, Dean, College of Education and Professor of Education, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742.