## SPECIAL REPORT

# INDIVIDUATION AND DISCRIMINATION
# IN THE CLASSROOM

Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, Ed.D., and Jean V. Carew, Ph.D.

Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, Mass.

---

*A negative tone pervades much of the literature on teacher discrimination in the classroom, and conjures up images of inequality, oppression, and racism. This paper differentiates between the negative forms of discrimination (responding prejudicially to children) and individuation (discerning differences among children and responding to individual needs). Focus is on the positive face of discrimination, as exemplified by three teachers who are highly "individuating" in their attitudes and behaviors towards children.*

---

The term *discrimination* has come to have predominantly negative associations. In education research it conjures up visions of the destructive teacher who favors whites over blacks, girls over boys, rich kids over poor kids —the teacher's attitudes and actions stemming from prejudice against the social groups to which the less favored children belong. The plea for nondiscrimination in this setting asks simply that all groups be considered equal so that no child starts with an advantage or disadvantage by virtue of group identification. But there is an older definition of discrimination, which has more positive connotations. It refers to the teacher's sensitivity to individual differences and her* responsiveness to the individual needs of children. For many, the hallmark of good teaching is precisely this ability to perceive and respond differentially to varying individual

* The feminine pronoun is used throughout simply because most teachers of young children are female.

styles, interests, needs—in other words, to be discriminating.

This paper will focus on this more positive form of discrimination in the classroom. It will do so by examining the behavior, values, goals, and personalities of three teachers whom we observed and interviewed in an exploratory study undertaken in preparation for research we are now carrying out. As black investigators, *negative* forms of discrimination are certainly of paramount concern. We urgently seek to understand and explain how it is that so many minority children come to be labeled "deficient" or "deviant" by their teachers, how these labels imposed by powerful others shape the children's experiences, and how these experiences in turn affect their intellectual, social, and emotional development. Nevertheless, we think it critical to recognize that the process of stigmatization through labels is not a psychologically unique phenomenon. Rather it is a grotesque distortion of a generally benign process of differentiation among children that teachers *must* undertake if they are to serve their individual needs. Teachers daily have to make difficult distinctions among their students if they wish to respond appropriately to their needs. Sometimes these decisions are misguided, sometimes they are rash, sometimes they have unintended harmful consequences. But the teacher who makes them is not necessarily acting out of malice or prejudice. On the contrary, her motive may be precisely that which inspires the best of teaching everywhere—to respond sensitively to the individual needs of children and to help them develop their abilities to the utmost. Therefore, to be objective, fair, and useful, one's judgment about the wisdom of a teacher's

actions must be based on considerable information about the teacher as a person; her cultural background, values, and ideology; her pedagogical philosophy and training; her educational objectives, teaching skills, and classroom experiences—much more information than is gathered in the typical research study. Teachers, after all, are complicated human beings and their motives and behavior deserve to be analyzed as much in terms of a positive model of individuation as in terms of its reverse. If teachers tend to act in terms of their expectations for pupils, so do social scientists. If we look only for the negative and destructive, that and only that is what we are likely to find.

A central problem for research on teaching, then, is to define the difference between individuation and discrimination in teacher behavior. *What is the difference between the teacher responding differentially to the individual needs of children and the teacher prejudicially discriminating against children?* In distinguishing between individuation and discrimination, one of our hypotheses is that true individuation demands that the teacher's perceptions and behavior towards individual children would be *consciously identified* by the teacher and would *change* over time. In other words, 1) the teacher recognizes that she is treating individual children differently; 2) she is able to articulate her reasons for this differential treatment; 3) her reasons are valid, in that they are consistent with an overall purpose of maximizing individual growth in all children; 4) she monitors her own behavior with respect to individual children; and 5) she flexibly changes her behavior when it seems ineffective or when changes in

the child's behavior require further adaptation on her part.

Individuation is conceived of as being highly reflective, adaptive, responsive, and changing over time; discrimination is viewed as being highly predetermined and relatively unchanging. One would expect discriminatory interactions between teachers and children to be established almost immediately and be sustained throughout the year, perhaps being intensified and hardened with the passage of time. One would also expect that the range of "acceptable" behaviors would differ in classrooms with teachers who individualized attention, as opposed to teachers who used discriminatory treatment. In other words, individuation seems to demand that the teacher accept and adapt to a broad range of differing behaviors and attitudes towards the educational process, whereas discrimination seems to imply a narrow range of behavioral choices available to children and a strong tendency for teachers to label many behaviors as deviant and unacceptable.

Finally, it is important to note that this definition of discriminatory treatment includes prejudicial behaviors towards *individual* children as well as towards identifiable *groups* of children. Included under the rubric of discrimination are the stereotyped, unchanging patterns of behavior towards an individual child, as well as toward groups of children whom the teacher has identified as unacceptable.

**THE URBAN SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY**

The distinctions we have tried to make between individuation and prejudicial discrimination are perhaps best conveyed by describing some of the characteristics of teachers who positively discriminate among their pupils in an effort to respond to individual needs and to maximize individual development. The literature is already plentiful with descriptions of teachers who practice prejudicial discrimination.[1, 3, 8] We offer this discussion as a counterbalance to the several studies that have focused exclusively on negative forms of discrimination. We will explore the concept of individuation by describing the background, values, educational philosophy, and behavior of three "highly individuating" teachers whom we observed and interviewed in a pilot study undertaken in preparation for our current work.

For this preliminary study we wanted to find a school where the teachers would not feel threatened by our presence in the classroom or the intrusive nature of our interview questions. The exploratory nature of our work also demanded that we find teachers who were articulate, reflective, and somewhat combative in pointing out the errors and misperceptions in the research process. We were extremely fortunate to find the Urban School,* where three such extraordinary teachers accepted our presence with generosity, grace, and appropriate skepticism.

The Urban School is a private Montessori school. The first impression one gets, however, is that it does not match the stereotypic image of private Montessori schools in this country—that of an extremely ordered and standardized environment filled with white, middle-class children. The Urban School does not

---

* The names of the school, principal, teachers, and children referred to in this section are changed to preserve confidentiality.

even look like a school. It is housed in the basement of a church. Sunlight barely shines through small basement windows; open spaces are divided by temporary partitions; it feels crowded and noisy. The classrooms do not belong to the teachers and children. The rooms must be dismantled at each week's end to make room for the church Sunday School.

One wonders how children and teachers can find order and peace in the midst of this environmental transience. After one sits in the school for a while, however, the atmosphere becomes less confused and distracting, and one begins to notice patterns of interaction among teachers and children that reflect a real sense of organization and clarity. It is as if teachers and children have learned to transcend the limitations of the crowded, dreary basement and carve out a more peaceful place to learn. Nevertheless, the major complaint of the teachers has to do with the terrible, unlivable physical setting. A major effort is being made by the principal and the board of trustees to raise funds for the building of a new school.

Although the school is private, with tuition ranging from $850 for primary children to $1150 for the older children, the principal and teachers like to think of the Urban School as an *alternative* school—alternative in the sense that it offers an educational experience markedly different from almost all public and private schools in the Boston area. The Urban School has an open-enrollment policy, which welcomes many children who have had unsuccessful and unhappy experiences in other schools. There has been a great attempt to provide scholarships to poor and minority children and to create classrooms that are socially, ethnically, and economically mixed.

Many of the school's attempts to provide real alternative experiences for children through structural and programmatic changes and to increase the heterogeneity of the school community have been limited by lack of adequate funds. The school is financially poor and constantly demands the generous energies of the principal, teachers, and parents in order to survive. The Urban School always hovers on the brink of being forced to resume a more traditional, stereotypic model because financially it cannot afford to be creative and innovative.

Teachers who were trained in a more traditional and homogeneous Montessori setting find the Urban School an exhilarating, exciting, and somewhat threatening environment, which constantly forces them to examine some of their basic assumptions about education. Teachers openly talk about the challenge of adapting their styles of teaching to reach children from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Probably the most powerful force in the school is the principal, Ms. Jordan, who is responsible for most of the basic reforms that have taken place in the past few years. Ms. Jordan is a young, strong, and energetic black woman who has moved the school from being a relatively homogeneous, elitist one to being more heterogeneous and eclectic. She has worked hard to encourage and support the entry of a wider range of children. In many cases, she has explicitly redefined and expanded some of the basic Montessori methods and styles of interaction to match the population of children in her school. The teachers speak of Ms. Jordan as the moving

power in the school, as a source of support and direction, and as a teacher both of children and of teachers.

There are three primary classrooms in the school, with twenty-seven children in each classroom who ranged in age at the beginning of the school year from two-and-a-half to five-and-a-half years. In each class there is a wide range of social and cognitive competencies—some children engage in presocial, egocentric behavior and have difficulty verbalizing; other children are highly skilled readers, can solve complex arithmetic problems, and are responsible participants in the social environment. To teach and guide the behavior of this heterogenous group of children there are three adults in each classroom: one trained Montessori teacher, one assistant teacher, and one unpaid volunteer. The Montessori teacher has primary responsibility for structuring the classroom environment; defining the curriculum and introducing new concepts, tasks, and materials to the children; evaluating the children's progress; and communicating with parents.

The aim of our exploratory study was to analyze the values, goals, attitudes, and behaviors of the three head teachers with respect to the contrasting notions of individuation and discrimination. For this purpose we developed and used two research procedures: classroom observations and interviews. The interactions of each teacher with the children in her class were observed on six separate occasions for an hour at a time, and the data were coded to reveal how she varied her behavior toward individual children who were members of different racial, socioeconomic, and sex groups. These observations were followed by two teacher interviews. The first interview focused on the teacher's background and history, her cultural and political orientation and values, her pedagogical objectives and the success or failures she experienced in reaching them, her beliefs about the suitability of the Montessori system for children of different backgrounds, the ways in which she modified her classroom behavior to accommodate individual differences, and so on. The second interview (the Retrospective Interview) used a technique which we think is not adopted frequently enough by researchers. This was to share the results of the observations with the teachers, and to ask them to respond to our "objective" evidence by challenging, criticizing, elaborating, or justifying it as they chose. We found this technique to be a most useful corrective to our other measures and a decidedly valuable source of information in helping us make the rather subtle distinction between individuation and prejudicial discrimination. In research on so sensitive a question, it seems to us absolutely necessary that the subject have the opportunity to review, challenge, and expand the researcher's conclusions. Both stand to gain from such a dialogue, the teacher by becoming more reflective and critical of her behavior and attitudes, the researcher by realizing the limitations of his or her own methods and often too narrow perspective.

We turn now to a description of the three Montessori teachers. In depicting these teachers we have tried to portray fallible human beings who make deliberate and careful decisions about the children in their care as well as impulsive, misguided, and sometimes dangerous judgments. Our purpose in exposing both their strengths and frailties is by

no means to place them in an unfavorable light. Rather it is to make the reader aware of the complex interplay of personality, values, motives, skill, training, and experience that influences the process of individuation and the inevitable hazards that even so benign and educationally productive a process necessarily entails.

## THREE TEACHERS

On first meeting, the three teachers seemed quite similar in background and experience. All three are white and in their mid-twenties. All attended four-year liberal arts colleges where they never took a course in education and never had any intention of becoming teachers. All seemed bright, capable, and committed to teaching, but claimed that they would probably not remain in the teaching profession indefinitely. They all expressed a desire to explore alternative educational environments and experience other kinds of work. All three teachers appeared to be unusually reflective and thoughtful about their interactions with children, and approached the interview as a creative opportunity—a chance to be challenged by new questions which might offer new insights and direction to their teaching.

### Ms. Robinson

Ms. Robinson is a soft-spoken person with a tentative voice that answers the interview questions haltingly. This does not seem to reflect uncertainty or shyness, but rather an attempt to communicate clearly. She is thoughtful and seems to struggle to think honestly about the questions and to phrase her answers so that the interviewer will be sure to understand her.

Ms. Robinson's appearance fades easily into the classroom that surrounds her. She is rather small and dresses without color or flair. She seems to belong on the small three-year-old chairs that we sit on for the interview. In fact, she continually refers to herself as part of the "environment," although she does not think herself as at the *center* of it. So Ms. Robinson's quiet, understated appearance seems to reflect the role she sees herself assuming in the classroom.

This is her third year teaching at the Urban School. Ms. Robinson went to a liberal arts college and majored in industrial relations. She had never thought of being a teacher, or even working with children, until the end of her senior year when she happened to visit a Montessori school. She was so impressed with the vitality of life in that school, the exploration and creativity of the children, and the role of the Montessori teacher, that she began to visit other Montessori schools and eventually decided to enter the Montessori Training Institute. After interning for a year at a much smaller, more conventional Montessori school, Ms. Robinson came to teach at the Urban School mainly because she was inspired by the style, abilities, and enthusiasm of the principal. She also wanted a more open environment that encouraged communication and exchange among teachers, as well as permitted a more eclectic and varied interpretation of the Montessori method. Ms. Robinson has been pleased with her choice of the Urban School.

The interview questions do not seem to introduce new areas of thought for Ms. Robinson. She seems to have given thought to many of the issues in the course of her teaching. One gets the feeling that she is a reflective, self-critical teacher who spends a great deal

of time considering her behavior and interactions with children. Although Ms. Robinson is given to analyzing the behavior and development of individual children, she also perceives the total picture of the environment, the patterns of interactions within the class as a whole and certain subgroups in the class. For instance, when we ask her to describe the children in her class (their characteristics as a whole group), she recalls how the twenty-seven children had come into the classroom as separate and distinct individuals with their own special needs. For the first few months they were absorbed with defining their *own space* in the classroom, and did not interact or communicate with each other very much. Ms. Robinson remembers this individualistic stage as being a common phenomenon in her previous years of teaching. Three-year-olds are particularly egocentric and hardly know how to think of themselves as part of a larger social group.

More quickly than in previous years, the individual children in this year's class began to become a *group* of children. A series of friendship networks was established and children began to be "careful of their neighbor." Ms. Robinson describes this group as special in that there was an absence of small, exclusive cliques. But sometime during late November, the relatively harmonious group was shattered by the angry and violent behavior of one of the older boys who was experiencing a great deal of disruption at home. Although only six years of age, David's parents had brought him to this school after a long career of expulsion from a series of public and private schools. David's behavior required a great deal of the teacher's attention and she was forced to neglect the needs of the other children in the class. This negative behavior rapidly spread to other children and touched off fearful and angry interactions throughout the classroom. Ms. Robinson was distressed and saddened as she watched the group behavior disintegrate and the individual children responding to each other in hostile, negative ways. Finally, Ms. Robinson asked the principal to assume a major role in caring for David and working with his parents. The principal's interventions restored relative peace to the classroom.

Ms. Robinson recalls that the period of disruption lasted about three months and caused serious pain and damage to both teachers and children. The class has begun to come together again, but many of the scars still remain. This story of transition, change, and development is not only perceived by Ms. Robinson, but obviously is very much internalized as part of how she decides to interact with the children.

Throughout these hard months, Ms. Robinson almost decided that this would be her last year of teaching. For the first time she found that she was not enjoying her work and she felt angry and disheartened in school. For days at a time the children would not see her smile, and she began to neglect the most important elements of teaching: to remember to "respect the children" and to "respond to each one as an individual with different needs." Ms. Robinson's own competence as a teacher was being threatened and she began to be self-critical of her every move in the classroom. Fortunately, now that the principal has relieved her of major responsibility for David, life in her classroom has become more peaceful and en-

joyable again and Ms. Robinson no longer thinks of leaving teaching.

When life is relatively harmonious in the classroom, Ms. Robinson describes her actions as watchful and observant. When she enters the room, she spends a few moments getting a sense of the total environment. She consciously refrains from immediately engaging in an interaction with an individual child until she has encompassed the wider scene of classroom activities. Then she begins to move slowly towards an individual or subgroup who seem to need her attention or to seek her help.

### Ms. Bradley

Ms. Bradley is tall, expressive, and energetic. She moves quickly and expansively, and talks with humor. During the interview, Ms. Bradley responds openly and without inhibition. She doesn't seem to be afraid of exposing her uncertainties and weaknesses, neither is she inhibited about expressing her confidence and pride. Ms. Bradley's classroom does not have the impeccable organization and sparsity of many Montessori classrooms. There is a large, colorful wall hanging and several pictures and charts that give life to the environment. She loves to create with her hands, and much of her handiwork is in evidence.

Ms. Bradley had never intended to become a teacher. Before college, she had experienced twelve years of parochial school which she remembers as relatively enjoyable, although a recognizably repressive period in retrospect. In college she became interested in Montessori when a child she knew, who had major learning difficulties and emotional problems, greatly improved after a year's experience in a Montessori

school. During her senior year in college, Ms. Bradley inquired about Montessori training, but the placement office at her college had never heard the name. After a miserable post-college year working in a hospital, Ms. Bradley found her way to a Montessori Training Institute. She described herself as a "skeptic" during her year of training, unwilling to be sold a bill of goods. But with a few years of experience, Ms. Bradley has become increasingly committed to the Montessori method and increasingly more accepting of its philosophy. "It works, that's all. I've never seen it not work."

Interestingly enough, Ms. Bradley says that her personality does not naturally match the method—that Maria Montessori would not have described her as the ideal teacher. She feels that she is too "quick and impatient." She goes too fast and tends to enjoy those children who can respond immediately, directly, and spontaneously, and to be impatient with those who are socially withdrawn and work more slowly. But Ms. Bradley claims that "the beautiful thing about Montessori is that it is *forgiving*." In other words, the structure of the method and the organization of materials create a context which can tolerate a wide range of teacher personalities and interactional styles.

Ms. Bradley's classroom has an unusually high proportion of older children, and she describes the class as being aggressive, assertive, and highly active. The children are very competitive and they express both anger and affection towards one another with equal ease and openness. Ms. Bradley believes that the principal probably assigned many of these older, more active children to her classroom, rather than to

one of the other primary teachers, because she tends to be rougher, louder, and can handle them more aggressively. She thinks that the relatively high level of activity among the children in her class is related to her own personality, which tends to encourage movement, expression, and assertiveness. Although the children have calmed down and become more of a cohesive group since September, the classroom is still very noisy and the interactions among children very energetic.

This is Ms. Bradley's first year at the Urban School, and she describes the experience as one which has forced her to grow. In her Montessori training, Ms. Bradley had taught in a conventional Montessori school serving a homogeneous population of children. In the Urban School, she has had to learn to interact with all kinds of children from a variety of backgrounds, and this has required that she find new methods and styles of communication. The principal apparently has talked a lot to the teachers about differential approaches that one uses with middle-class and working-class children that reflect the kinds of experiences they have had in the home environment. With the principal's encouragement, Ms. Bradley has learned to give directions in a *commanding* tone with lower-class children and in a more *negotiating, conversational* tone with middle-class children. The need to make commands is seen as a *transitional* stage in which the teacher is helping the children learn the structure and rules of the classroom environment. Ms. Bradley finds that commanding, bossy style unnatural and antithetical to her educational goals. She feels, therefore, that the use of commands and punishments should fade as soon as the children become more familiar with the preferred gentle, democratic interactional style of the classroom environment. (During the interview, Ms. Bradley makes this distinction between working-class and middle-class children tentatively and with some signs of guilt. She seems to feel better when she can attribute the need for differential behavior to the principal, who is a black woman, and therefore is supposed to be speaking with greater legitimacy and knowledge.)

When we ask Ms. Bradley whether children in her classroom organize themselves into any identifiable groups, her immediate response is that black children group themselves separately. She explains this separation between the six black children and the rest of the class with some dismay and uncertainty, and proceeds immediately to talk about the exceptions to that generalization. But it is obviously something of which she does not feel proud or comfortable. When we ask her why she thinks the black children chose each other as friends, she says that she perceived it as being a reflection of their dependence and lack of confidence in themselves as competent and good people. (In fact, two of the children whom Ms. Bradley had identified as having the most difficulty adjusting to classroom life were members of this group of black children.) In other words, children who feel strong and positive about themselves do not need the support and protection of a group, but can fend for themselves as independent individuals. In the eyes of Ms. Bradley, the black clique is an expression of weakness, and the gradual disintegration of the group is an indication of the growth of individual competence and initiative.

*Ms. Jones*

This is Ms. Jones's first year teaching at the Urban School. The previous two years, she taught in a small, very elitist Montessori School in the country, which had carpeted floors, luxurious classrooms, and golden sunlight shining through the windows. There were no scholarship children and no minority children, and the school had a very exclusionary, protected character—closed to the outside world. Although she had transferred to the Urban School because she wanted a more open atmosphere in which to work, Ms. Jones found the transition difficult and somewhat threatening. Almost immediately she was accused of being rigid and uptight by a mother who wanted her child to have a more flexible, free experience in school. Ms. Jones also felt that her colleagues perceived her as being overly structured and controlling in her interactions with children. As a matter of fact, Ms. Jones does have the reputation of being somewhat "anal" and thoroughly organized. But her colleagues hasten to add that their perception of Ms. Jones is not a negative judgment, but rather an expression of respect. Sometimes they feel envious of Ms. Jones's ability to clearly and neatly structure the environment of the classroom and keep organized, continuous records of her interactions with children.

Ms. Jones's classroom is classically organized, with all of the Montessori materials neatly and correctly placed on the shelves for clear visibility and order. The walls are bare of any pictures or other sources of distraction which might compete for the child's attention. Ms. Jones is also the only one of the three primary teachers who clearly delineates the various roles played by the three adults in the classroom. She refers to all three of them as teachers, and describes the expanding, more responsible position that her assistant teachers have taken since the beginning of the school year. She, however, assumes most of the direction and responsibility for the environment. She also believes that the children perceive the distinctions among the teachers and appeal to her as the ultimate authority. During the course of the day, one of the three teachers serves as *supervisor* while the other two are involved in interaction with individuals or small groups of children. The supervisor is supposed to be an observer of the total classroom scene, keeping track of the general behavior and activity but avoiding prolonged conversations with individual children. She also keeps a record of the various activities and tasks of each child, which becomes part of the cumulative record of the individual profiles of children in Ms. Jones's classroom.

Ms. Jones's reputation for structure and organization may be due partly to her previous teaching experience in a highly controlled and homogeneous Montessori school which demanded a more conservative interpretation of the Montessori method, but it also seems to be very much related to Ms. Jones's own personal style and individual character. She is thoughtful and methodical in answering interview questions and seems to approach the task of teaching with serious concern and little evidence of humor. She seems to feel strongly, but is unwilling to express her emotions openly. When we ask whether she feels free to share the problems and uncertainties that she is experiencing in the classroom with the principal and the other primary teachers, she says that al-

though she is becoming more open with her colleagues, she still tends to be too inhibited about discussing those issues that she hasn't fully figured out herself.

With reference to children, Ms. Jones describes herself as being rather soft and nonthreatening in her approach. In the first few months of school, Ms. Jones would rarely confront a child with something he or she had done wrong. It was very unusual for Ms. Jones to make a personal, expressive, and open evaluation of a child's misbehavior, but she tended to guide behavior and communicate her judgments in more subtle ways. The principal of the school, however, encouraged Ms. Jones to be more open in her communication with children, to express her *own* feelings, and to verbalize "exactly what was going on with the child." The principal's urgings have had a pervasive impact on Ms. Jones's style, although she admits that direct expression of feelings does not come naturally to her, and she still does not think that this is an appropriate style with very young children who are naturally somewhat egocentric and self-centered and who have a difficult time expressing their thoughts and feelings verbally.

One reason that Ms. Jones has consciously avoided confrontations with individual children is that she believes that they can become distinctly judgmental and that a child might begin to translate negative teacher evaluations into a demeaning self-concept. She strives, therefore, to establish a clear set of *impersonal* ground rules in the classroom. She sees these rules as "structural" and "neutral" in tone, and she tries very hard not to involve herself and her emotions too much in the communication of these standards. In other words, Ms. Jones seeks to depersonalize the general rules and procedures of the classroom, so that children will never feel them as individualized judgments of their capabilities or character. She recounts the damage that was done to one child in her class who had been told during his first year of schooling, in another place, that he was a "naughty boy." When Ms. Jones now tells him not to sit on some other child's mat, he responds, "John's a naughty boy." And Ms. Jones corrects him, "No, you're not a naughty boy, but you may not sit on Susan's mat because it is distracting to her."

Throughout the interview, Ms. Jones speaks of the most important goal of education as being the development of *independence* and a *positive self-concept* in children. When she is asked which children she feels most successful with, Ms. Jones says that she is most pleased with those children who have become more self-sufficient and independently competent during the course of the year. She talks proudly of those children who had entered the classroom as shy and withdrawn people, afraid to reach out in social interactions and afraid to approach a task requiring intellectual competence, but who throughout the year have become increasingly aware of their talents and more able to be assertive and independent individuals. One has the sense that Ms. Jones, in developing her own identity as a teacher, is very much identifying with these children who have grown from being alone and withdrawn to being more open and positively expressive.

## THE RETROSPECTIVE INTERVIEW

The interactions of each teacher with the children in her class were observed

on six separate occasions for one hour at a time, the visits being spread out over eight weeks. These observation data were coded to record how the teacher varied her behavior toward individual children who were members of different racial, social class, and sex groups. The data analysis revealed only one systematic difference in the way teachers treated these groups. All three teachers discriminated significantly between boys and girls on variables that we judged to be of major educational significance. They gave significantly more attention to boys, both in inhibiting and controlling inappropriate behavior and in participating in and facilitating their educational experiences. It is important to note that no significant differences were found in the teachers' treatment of children of different racial and social class groups, a finding that validates the stated pluralistic philosophy of the school.

In the Retrospective Interviews, we introduced the data we had collected in all three classrooms concerning the teachers' differential treatment of boys and girls. We asked each teacher if the observation data seemed reasonable and valid, whether they were conscious of their differential responses to boys and girls, and how they justified their behavior in terms of their educational goals for children. Interestingly, none of the teachers seemed either surprised or defensive on hearing that they gave boys more direction and attention, and they all justified their differential behaviors on the basis of their perceptions of the children's needs.

For instance, Ms. Bradley spoke of the boys as being a "disadvantaged" group of children. She perceived them as being deprived because they had mini-mal opportunities to be close to their fathers and other men in the way that girls experience closeness and intimacy with their mothers. Because fathers are gone to work most of the day and only become available as visible models for their sons in the late evening hours, Ms. Bradley viewed boys as being in greater need of companionship, direction, and authority. In an attempt to accommodate to the needs of boys, Ms. Bradley said that she consciously assumed a "neuter" role in the classroom. In a sense, she tried to become asexual and not repeat the patterns of a mother-child relationship in her interactions with children. Therefore, she discouraged the approaches of girls that seemed to be related to the stereotyped behavior of women (*e.g.,* she did not let girls play with her long blond hair, and would not engage in a game of house with them), and she encouraged more contact with boys by reaching out towards them more, by initiating neutral and nonthreatening interactions.

Ms. Jones also spoke of the special needs of boys, but her reasoning was related to her perception of developmental differences between boys and girls. In her experience, Ms. Jones found that girls were likely to adapt more easily to the requirements of the classroom environment. They seemed better able to concentrate on a single task and to tolerate the restraints of the physical space, and more inclined to please and accommodate to the teacher as the guiding force in the classroom. When boys entered the classroom at age two-and-a-half, or three, they tended to be less self-directed and task oriented, more intolerant of the limited inside space, and less likely to be concerned with pleasing the teacher or learning the appropriate

social behaviors with peers. Ms. Jones did not claim that these sexual differences were genetically based, but that there were developmental differences between boys and girls and that these differences were exaggerated and intensified by patterns of socialization in families. In other words, by age three, most of these children had been well socialized into the behaviors and attitudes traditionally associated with their sex, and girls tended to be further along the developmental path both cognitively and socially. Ms. Jones's differential responses to boys and girls were based on her view of boys as being more difficult to socialize into the Montessori environment. They required more direction from the teacher because they were seen as being farther from the normal range of acceptable behaviors.

The preliminary data from this study illuminate the complexity of the concept of discrimination. Three very reflective, thoughtful, and creative teachers were more intensely involved with the boys in their classrooms, and girls received fewer interactions. However, the teachers had clear and compelling reasons for their differential behaviors. In fact, differential interactions were often consciously undertaken to modify the unequal patterning that the children had received in their families *before* entering school. Ms. Bradley wanted girls to be less concerned with prettiness and petty jealousies (female stereotypes), and she wanted boys to be more able to reach out for intimate and gentle contact (often associated with the female character). Shall we consider her attempts to overturn society's traditional patterns as evidence of discriminatory behavior against girls? Not necessarily. We would not judge these behaviors to be prejudi-

cial discrimination unless: 1) the teacher was not conscious of her differential treatment of boys and girls; 2) her justification for treating them differently was irrational or arbitrary; 3) she showed little variation in her behaviors towards individual boys, but related to boys and their needs as a homogeneous, undifferentiated group; and 4) her behavior and attitudes towards them remained constant and unchanging over a substantial period of time. For none of the teachers in this school were these criteria true.

The three teachers gave us additional insights into the subtle process of individuation and into ways teachers have of minimizing prejudicial discrimination. Teaching was considered by all of them to be a diagnostic process requiring continuous reassessment of one's perceptions and evaluations. The process of diagnosis required that the teacher become a listener, a watchful nonparticipant, and that she give the child a great deal of time and liberty to express himself in contexts in which the teacher was not the dominant figure. The process of diagnosis also required that the teacher keep accurate and impartial notes of the child's behavior, and that these records be discussed with others (teachers, parents) familiar with the child, before specific strategies for changing his behavior were applied.

All three teachers also spoke of establishing a sensitive balance between responding to the emotional and developmental needs of individual children and transmitting the requirements of responsible participation in a group. In the teachers' experience, one of the ways to avoid prejudicial behaviors was to depersonalize the requirements of the social context so that no one child

would feel personally victimized. If the classroom rules are made visible and explicit, and if rules are part of the requirements of the social and physical environment, then every child can be held justifiably accountable. More importantly, if a child transgresses the rules and receives a negative response from the teacher, he can trace the origins of her discontent and is less likely to feel unfairly abused. The teacher's criticism is not directed at *who* the child is or what he might represent to her, but rather at what he has done in relation to the established behavioral norms.

So whether a child might experience discrimination has something to do with the range of acceptable behaviors and the visibility of norms. In other words, the teacher is more likely to engage in a discriminatory act if she defines normality very narrowly (so that only a select few can adapt to the behaviors associated with her definition of normal) and if she does not make her ground rules clear, visible, and consistent.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our discussion has touched on a range of issues researchers must face in trying to unravel the behavioral and attitudinal components of a theoretical construct. The concept of discrimination has been so obscured by the polemic surrounding educational institutions that it is difficult to analyze it clearly. This paper was written to share some of the difficulties and insights we have had in trying to understand what the concept means for the education of children.

The first wisdom we have come upon is that things are not quite what they seem. When one looks at the social realities of discrimination and individuation

within classrooms, there are many layers of meaning. The discovery of each new layer changes our perception of the whole. In a sense, we ask the reader to rid himself of the cultural obsessions that we seem to attach to the concepts of deviance and difference. Our invitation to the reader is much like that of Berger's,[2] when he spoke of sociology as a form of consciousness:

The experience of sociological discovery should be described as cultural shock minus geographical displacement. In other words, the sociologist travels at home—with shocking results . . . what [sociologists] have in common with exploration in distant lands is the sudden illumination of new and unsuspected facets of human existence in society. This is the excitement and the humanistic justification of sociology. (pp. 23–24)

Our discussion, although exploratory and tentative, has pointed to some important dimensions that should be included in a balanced analysis of the positive and negative sides of discrimination. First, any description and analysis of differentiation within classrooms must consider the demands of the social context as well as the dynamic aspects of human encounter. Second, a discussion of discrimination must not be personless; that is, we must include the motivational and characterological dimensions from which actions originate and behavior is perceived. Third, we must recognize discrimination as an interactional phenomenon that requires categorization and labeling on the part of the teacher, and response to that labeling on the part of the recipient who might choose to accept, negate, modify, or ignore the discriminatory act.

One of the challenges of our research will be to design methodological strategies that document the characteristics of the social context, the dynamics of hu-

man encounter, and the consciousness and reasoning of the participtants involved in the educational process. We hope that this work will open new windows through which to view the classroom scene—windows that will frame a more complex and subtle picture of the two faces of discrimination.

## REFERENCES

1. BECKER, H. 1952. Social class variation in teacher-pupil relationships. J. Ed. Sociol. 25:451–465.
2. BERGER, P. 1965. Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective. Doubleday, New York.
3. CLARK, K. 1965. Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power. Harper and Row, New York.
4. EDDY, E. 1967. Walk the White Line: A Profile of Urban Education. Anchor Books (Doubleday), Garden City, N.Y.
5. LEACOCK, E., ed. 1971. The Culture of Poverty: A Critique. Simon and Schuster, New York.
6. RIST, R. 1970. Student social class and teacher expectations: the self-fulfilling prophecy in ghetto education. Harvard Ed. Rev. 40(3):411–451.
7. ROSENTHAL, R. AND JACOBSON, L. 1968. Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectations and Pupil Intellectual Development. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York.
8. TORREY, J. 1970. Illiteracy in the ghetto. Harvard Ed. Rev. 40(2):29–50; 40(5):253–259.