# "Teacher they called me a...!"

Confronting Prejudice and Discrimination in the Classroom

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Schooling that is constant with democratic principles should actively teach and promote such basic concepts as freedom, equality, and individual rights and responsibilities. Children must learn to understand their rights, the rights of others, and concern for the well-being and dignity of all. One of the greatest deterrents to these democratic goals is prejudice. These preconceived ideas are usually based on stereotypes about those who are perceived as being different, due to race, religion, culture, gender, disabilities, appearance, language, sexual orientation, or social status. These prejudices are the basis of negative attitudes and often discriminatory actions. Adults in the United States like to believe children are immune to prejudice. Our culture celebrates the innocence of childhood; children are believed to be somehow morally quarantined from the corrosive nature of such a pervasive social problem as prejudice. Yet, the basis for prejudice is laid at an early age, prior even to children starting school. Children learn about prejudice and discrimination from their peers, their families, the media, community interactions and, at times, their churches. Our children become easy targets for those who engage in prejudice and discrimination when we fail to talk about how wrong such thinking and actions are. Children begin developing attitudes about various groups in society as early as age three or four. Initially such attitudes are quite flexible. However, as children grow older such attitudes become more difficult to change. Teachers can make a valuable contribution toward developing a more just society by taking an active role in addressing prejudice and discrimination in their classrooms.

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