

The Social Roots of Learning

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The study described here was carried on by Ruth Hardiman, kindergarten teacher at Gilpin School, Denver, Colorado, under the guidance of John T. Robinson, consultant and staff member of the Center for Intergroup Education, The University of Chicago. The Center formerly was the Intergroup Education in Cooperating Schools Project sponsored by the American Council on Education. This study has raised several fundamental questions in curriculum planning and has given the classroom teacher a new field of endeavor.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD of the school in which this study was carried on is composed of lower-income working class families; many children are not always clean, their behavior is not always what schools expect. We tend to generalize about a neighborhood as a type of community, often omitting an attempt to understand the aspirations, the fears, the feelings, and accepted ways of doing things which affect so strongly the behavior and feelings of children.

A Variety of Backgrounds

When the neighborhood contains several racial and cultural groups, over-generalizations are more dangerous. In this school there are children from Negro, "Anglo," Spanish-speaking, and Nisei families. The meanings of these group memberships are often as much rumor as fact. For instance, the position of fathers in the family organization of Spanish-speaking families is often assumed to be different than others.

The fact that children come from a range of backgrounds—economic, racial, family—makes the decision of what to teach and how to teach ex-

tremely difficult. The teacher who participated in this study sought help in making these decisions from some of the current literature. Such readings as *Color, Class and Personality*,¹ *Not With the First*,² *Who Shall Be Educated?*³ and Allison Davis' Inglis lectures on acculturation⁴ were of immeasurable assistance in gaining insight into the general backgrounds that affect children's learning.

The Teacher-Researcher

But for help in interpreting the specific needs of the children, the teacher had to know something of their backgrounds of experience. At this point it is necessary to stress the importance of involving the classroom teacher in curriculum research at this level. Information about children's backgrounds

¹ Sutherland, Robert L., *Color, Class and Personality*. Washington, D. C.: American Council on Education, 1942.

² Tuck, Ruth D., *Not With the First*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1946.

³ Warner, W. L., Havighurst, R. J., and Loeb, M., *Who Shall Be Educated?* New York: Harper & Bros., 1944.

⁴ Davis, Allison, *Social Class Influences Upon Learning, The Inglis Memorial Lecture*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948.



*Santa Monica (Calif.) Public Schools
A variety of backgrounds*

gathered by someone else and interpreted to the teacher somehow loses its flavor in the process. Teachers need help in determining what information they need and how to get it, help in

interpreting the information, and time to do the job. This help was possible by providing the services of a curriculum consultant and a substitute to give the teacher needed extra time.

To get some insight into the relationships that children understood and upon which she could build, the teacher assembled information on children's experiences and how they interpreted them. From school records she learned where the children lived, what their fathers' occupations were, whether the mothers worked, and whether children lived in complete or broken families. But the records told her nothing at all about the existing relationships and what children had learned to expect of others and themselves.

Searching for Clues

Classroom observation gave a few hints: Jo was always isolated from other children; Mary Ann could play with only one other child; Betsy did not like to play with children who were dressed less well than she; Tommy's method of playing was to scoot in, grab a toy from other children, and then run to play by himself.

Children's casual comments gave some information:

"Mama's gone away. My real daddy works on the railroad, but I never see him. I've moved."

"I get a whippin' with a belt!"

"Sometimes they put me in the cellar. It's dark and I can't see so I cry, and they let me come out. I don't like to get a spanking or be put in the cellar, so I do what they say!"

The teacher realized that she would have to get information on children's out-of-school experiences if she were to understand their behavior and find ways of helping them. Since young children are closely tied to their family groups, she turned to the children and their parents for this information. She constructed an interview schedule for parents and children covering certain general points since she wanted to be able to compare responses. Some of the questions asked were:

- What work are children expected to do around home?
- With whom do children play, what do they play, and what do they enjoy?
- With whom do parents associate?
- What does the family do together?
- How are children punished, by whom, and what for?
- What do parents like to do and feel they have an opportunity to do?

To assure good results from parent interviews, the teacher approached parents three weeks before the start of school. In arranging for a visit she told the parents that she wanted to get acquainted so that she could help their child more quickly. Appointments were made before and after school, and during school hours. This past year the school provided substitutes to release teachers for interviews that had to be held during school hours. This year the children attended half sessions for the first two weeks to allow time for interviews.

The teacher studied techniques for interviewing and selected those that seemed most appropriate. For this purpose she found Warner's *Social Life in a Modern Community*⁵ most helpful.



The interviews were as informal as possible. The teacher placed no judgment on anything parents told her and maintained an interested attitude, making enough lead-on comments to help

⁵ Warner, W. Lloyd, et al, *Social Life in a Modern Community*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1941.

the parent talk. After the parent left, she wrote up the interview, recalling as much of the parent's own wording as possible. Children were interviewed later using simplified versions of the same procedures. The teacher talked to the children in a vacant room, permitting them to tell their story with the help of toys if they wished.

Contrary to what most teachers expect, it was not difficult to get the parents to visit the teacher. There were sixty-five children in the two kindergarten groups. Over sixty percent of the parents came to school. Seventeen percent worked and had no "free time." A few spoke no English. Most parents seemed to appreciate the fact that someone was interested in them and their children.

SOME FINDINGS

Status levels

In this generally low economic area many status levels were found. The families lived at different economic levels; families had different ways of viewing the neighborhood; families had different expectations; families used different techniques to fulfill these expectations. Some parents restricted their children's play associates, selecting those whom they considered "nice." Mrs. J. encouraged Diane to bring home children whose parents had steady jobs but discouraged others whose families she considered

shiftless. Some parents wished their children to move up in the social scale and dressed them beyond their means as they considered clothes a badge of "being somebody." Some children were directed to use a status adult as an ego ideal; Mrs. C. told her daughter to "watch how the teacher acts because she's real nice." Some mothers' main concern was keeping their children out of trouble: "I worry about him getting into trouble, but I work at night, and there's nothing I can do."



Hartford Ave. School, Milwaukee, Wisc.

Good results come from interviews

Demands on children

Families made different demands on their children. Some youngsters had clearly defined jobs to do at home. These responsibilities were often quite adult for such young children: they made beds; carried in coal; took care of a younger brother or sister. One-third of the parents reported that they did not require their children to do anything, and nine children said they were not expected to do anything.

Some children had learned ways of manipulating others to escape a dreaded chore. Children gave such examples as these: "I said to Joe, 'You wash the dishes and I'll empty the trash.'" "When I'm supposed to do something, I ask my daddy to do it for me. If he won't, I ask my mama. If she won't, I ask my sister. If she won't, I do it myself."

Some children had to live up to certain clearly defined behavior. One father, for example, was angry because his five-year-old son liked to help do the dishes; it was not manly behavior, and he expected his son to "be a man."

Discipline at home

Expectations were enforced in a variety of ways. Being "talked to," "yelled at," or scolded was the most frequent form of punishment and, in some cases, the only form. Nearly half the children said they were spanked—some severely with a strap or belt. Most of the parents who reported spanking said they thought children *had* to be spanked occasionally.

"I think every child needs to be spanked to let him know that there are some places that he must conform."

"Sometimes I give her a good tanning."

That's the way children learn. I know it worked with me, and when they quit tanning, I quit learning."

Many parents denied privileges and restricted activity. Children were asked to stay in, go to bed, or sit on a chair as punishment. Often playtime or spending money was taken away. One mother reported that they never went to a show unless all could go; if one member did something wrong, nobody could go. Sometimes these punishments were applied with vengeance. One mother reported: "I make her sit on a chair. She hates that worse than anything because she'll get up, and I push her down; she'll get up, and I push her down." A few parents and some children recognized inconsistencies in their patterns of punishment.

Fostering friendships

Most parents placed ability to get along with others quite high. They seemed especially anxious that their children get along with other children at school. Yet there seemed to be no pattern for providing associations from which to learn how to get along together. Some parents encouraged their children to go out and play merely to get them out of the way. As one child explained: "My mama's working beads, making belts, and she don't want to be bothered with me."

Class conscious parents

Parents teach their children to be conscious of the groups to which they belong and condition their feelings toward their own group and toward others. "I want her to rise above being Spanish," tells how one mother views her own group. Parents systematically

teach their children to follow their own attitudes toward others. "I tell him he can't play with those kids down the street; I want him to play in his own group," and "I told her before she came to school that some of the children won't look like she does, but they are just as good. I don't want her to think she's better than anybody else."

Changes in the Classroom

These data made it possible to change some classroom procedures. Activities were planned in which children could assume responsibility for their own actions and see the consequences. The teacher took care to create an atmosphere in which the consequences would not be overwhelming. More opportunity was provided for children to play out and talk about situations familiar to them. The teacher tried to arrange activities in which differences

in wants, abilities, and ways of behaving would be acceptable and prized.

But gathering this information has raised some considerations in curriculum planning that the teacher had accepted but not really thought about before—questions that teachers must learn to answer more specifically than in the past. When families place a great deal of pressure upon children to "do better than I have," what must the school provide to help children learn these new behaviors? What can the school do to relieve the tension which this pressure creates? How can we help children interpret the experiences they have which puzzle them? How can we provide them with skills to handle situations in which they are insecure? These are only a few questions which now concern the teacher. Their answers seem to require testing of classroom practices over a sufficiently long period of time to see their results.

Action Research Means Cooperation—

These two articles describe an action research project carried on in Springfield, Missouri. The Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation, Teachers College, Columbia University, and the Springfield public schools are collaborating on a research study investigating value formation in children. These articles demonstrate clearly that research *can* be a cooperative venture between a research institute and a school system.

FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF SCHOOL SUPERVISORS

D. C. Rucker, Curriculum Director, and Alice Pittman, Elementary Supervisor, Springfield, Missouri, public schools.

CLASSROOM TEACHERS do not generally consider educational research to be their function. However, they are constantly seeking to improve their teaching and in so doing are dealing

with problems which are subjects for valuable research. If research could be so planned that it challenged teachers as a practical means of dealing with their urgent problems, professional

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