

Social Class and the Curriculum

CELIA BURNS STENDLER

Too frequently are the schools reluctant to face problems of social class in planning instructional programs. Celia Burns Stendler, associate professor of education at the University of Illinois, Urbana, points out that our schools have a contribution to make in modifying our present class structure so that it will be in keeping with democratic ideals.

A STATEMENT frequently repeated these days is to the effect that it is safer to talk about sex education than it is to talk about social class and the schools at the present time.

SOCIAL CLASS A REALITY

Perhaps we have been reluctant to face the problem because we feel that the concept of social class is one that runs counter to our democratic traditions. Yet the existence of a class-stratified society in America has been established in many studies. In the East, the Midwest, and the South, in such far-flung communities as Yankee City and Prairie City, in villages, towns, and small cities, sociologists have found evidence of a class structure and have described the characteristics of each of five or six social classes in minute detail.

As distasteful as it may be to our democratic palate, the overwhelming amount of evidence makes it clear that members of American communities are assigned places in a class hierarchy according to such factors as income, occupation, place of residence, length of residence, home ownership, family connections, and clique membership. Furthermore, the good things of life are distributed unevenly according to class membership with upper-class members

enjoying certain rights and privileges because of their upper-class affiliation and lower-class members suffering certain penalties by virtue of being lower class.¹

Children Aware of Social Class

It has also been established through research that children are aware of social class. While awareness of some of the symbols of class may come to a few children even before the sixth grade, by the time children leave the eighth grade most of them can distinguish symbols connected with lower, middle, and upper-classness. They are making judgments on the basis of the kinds of houses in which people live, differences in occupation, the section of town in which people reside, as well

¹ See such studies as:

Davis, Allison; Gardner, Burleigh; and Gardner, Mary R. *Deep South*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941.

Havighurst, Robert J. and Taba, Hilda. *Adolescent Character and Personality*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1949.

Hollingshead, A. B., *Elmtown's Youth*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1949.

Warner, W. Lloyd. *Democracy in Jonesville*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949.

Warner, W. Lloyd and Lunt, Paul S. *The Social Life of a Modern Community*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941.

Warner, W. Lloyd; Havighurst, Robert J.; and Loeb, M. B. *Who Shall Be Educated?* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944.

West, James. *Plainville, U. S. A.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1945.

as certain ways of living associated with various classes.

Furthermore, children are also aware of the class position of their school-mates and are selecting friends and making judgments with regard to behavior of people on a social-class basis. Stereotyped ways of thinking about social class have developed, with children tending to associate favorable items of behavior with upper-class members and unfavorable with lower.

However, along with this association goes an attempt to defend the poor and to criticize the rich, perhaps in an attempt to make one's own social class position more tolerable. Many eighth graders, for example, think that upper-class children are "selfish, snooty, stick to themselves, think they're too good, think they're big shots, do things behind people's backs." Lower-class children, on the other hand, are "friendly, cooperative, more generous, hard-working, tougher, unafraid, and honest. All they lack is a 'bringing-up.'"²

Schools Implicated in Class Structure

A third point which needs to be clearly recognized by teachers is the fact that schools are already implicated in the social class structure. Here again we have evidence from research to indicate that in our schools certain children are selected from the lower class and are helped to move up the social scale by individual teachers. The reverse is also true. There are some children whom the school decides are not socially mobile and those youngsters are advised with regard to the selection of high school curriculum in such a way

² Stendler, Celia Burns. *Children of Brasstown*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949. p. 86.

that social mobility becomes almost impossible.

Social class factors may also decide such things as membership in supposedly homogeneous groups, selection of stars for assembly programs, and, particularly, in teacher attitude toward pupils.³ Perhaps the most shocking example of this last point is the illustration in *Elmtown's Youth* of the high school principal who ignores the tardiness of an upper-class pupil but who brutally attacks a lower-class member for the same kind of conduct.⁴

Recent research by Davis and others indicates other ways in which our schools may show unconscious bias toward lower-class children. It would appear from their evidence that our intelligence tests contain many items which are easily recognizable to children from upper-class groups, but which may be quite difficult for children who have not had cultural opportunities to become acquainted with them. Davis also points out that our present curricula particularly in the primary grades, because they are highly verbalistic, are heavily weighted in favor of upper-class children. Davis's recommendation is that all children need to be taught *to think*, to solve problems, rather than to wrestle with words in a superficial way.⁵

IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The problem of the meaning of research findings in social class for the

³ Warner, W. L.; Havighurst, R. J. and Loeb, M. B. *op. cit.*

⁴ Hollingshead, A. B. *op. cit.* pp. 190-191.

⁵ Davis, Allison. *Implications of Social Class for Learning*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948.

schools remains to be explored. Some implications for the treatment of children are readily apparent. We can examine the membership of our "homogeneous" groupings to see if they discriminate against lower-class children; we can learn to recognize our own biases in reacting to child behavior; we can discontinue the use of tests and teaching materials which have been prepared with upper classes in mind.

These solutions, while important, still are in the nature of superficial solutions. While they serve to make life more tolerable for lower-class children, they do not bring about fundamental change in the class structure of America. The proposals suggested in the rest of this article are based upon the belief that our class structure is not in keeping with democratic ideals and that it should be changed. The schools can contribute to such a change only through a vigorous program of curriculum revision which recognizes the research findings in social class and builds upon them.

Examination of Present Curricula

The first proposal is that teachers through the sixth grade critically examine the present curriculum to see to what extent it encourages and continues the present class structure in America. A fairly common curriculum pattern is for children in the first grade to explore home and family life; the second grade studies community helpers; in the third grade the children go back in history to a study of Indians and early settlers in a community; in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades they undertake a study of other lands as

well as the early history and later development of our country.

This is not a curriculum pattern which the writer can accept with any degree of enthusiasm. Nevertheless, since it does exist, it would seem necessary for teachers who are aware of the social class problem to see to what extent they can be more realistic in their teaching, and more in keeping with our democratic ideals, even within this frame.

One of our ideals is the worth of the individual, which implies a respect for, and acceptance of differences in people. Yet in the first grade where children study home and family life, all too often only a middle or upper-class picture of family life is presented. Our reading books and our discussions have tended to give the child the picture of a respectable family as consisting of a mother, a father, a boy and a girl, who own a dog and/or a cat, who live very comfortably in an attractive house with all kinds of modern conveniences and who have well-heeled grandparents on a farm. The children are clean, white, and Nordic. This stereotype is so built up in the child's mind that he comes to see as different, and hence as not quite respectable, families who live in different ways, even though they may be his own.

Pointing Out Differences

In her study of family life with first graders, the teacher who is social-class oriented can help her group explore the many ways in which families may differ. They may differ in composition, in housing, in occupation of father and mother, in dress, in income, in the way they live. In exploring these differences,

the teacher would attempt to bring out generalizations such as these:

- While families differ in many ways, there are many ways in which they are alike
- Families are not always able to improve the way in which they live nor to live as they would like
- We cannot make judgments about the goodness and badness of people on the basis of their homes or dress
- In a democratic society, it is safe to be different.

How People Earn Their Living

The second grade pattern with its all too familiar study of the postman, milkman, fireman, policeman, and the like might also be examined critically. While anyone who accepts the democratic ideal of the dignity and worth of each individual would not deny the postman an important place in our society, one might question the glorification of these so-called community helpers. It is a bit incongruous in the light of the upper-lower-class status assigned to such occupational groups, and in the light of the low economic return for such services, so to exaggerate their roles. The fuzzy ideas of our economic system held by primary graders may be illustrated in the following story:

A second grader who had recently visited the post office was tremendously impressed with the importance of postal clerks. His mother asked him one day whom he considered the most important person in the community.

"President Stoddard," (president of the University of Illinois, and whom he confuses with President Truman) was the answer.

"And after him?" asked the mother.

"Mr. Markwell (the postal clerk) in the post office," was the reply.

"Where do you think Mr. Markwell lives? In a nice section of town, or just medium?"

"Oh, probably down on Florida Avenue." (*upper class*)

"But he'd need to have lots of money to live there, wouldn't he?"

"Sure" (condescendingly), but all the people buy stamps and give him money so he *has* lots."

Again, the primary teacher who is social-class oriented can be more realistic and more in keeping with democratic ideals in her teaching of how people in a community earn a living. Not merely "community helpers" in a conventional sense, but other workers such as industrial workers, farm hands, unskilled laborers, bankers, doctors, lawyers, storekeepers, teachers, and the like can be studied for their contribution to society. This is a study that might well extend beyond the primary grades, with generalizations such as the following, selected with an eye to their appropriateness to a particular age group, being stressed:

- People earn a living in our society in a variety of ways
- We do not pay people on the basis of how useful their work is
- Pay for a particular job is determined largely on the basis of how many people are trained to do that kind of job
- All forms of useful work should be regarded as respectable
- We should learn to make judgments regarding people in terms of the kind of people they are and not in terms of the kind of work they do. Not all policemen are good, kind people who help us. Not all doctors are unselfish individuals who work tirelessly for the good of all.

Study of Class Structure in High School

By the time children reach the

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seventh and eighth grades, they have fairly well formulated notions of social class. Therefore, it would seem advisable for a systematic study of the class structure of America to be undertaken in the junior and senior high schools. Materials such as *Yankee City* could be used in part, and students helped to see not only the existence of social class, but also the reasons for it.

But junior and senior high school students are also beginning to feel the advantages or disadvantages of their particular class position, and some recognition of their feeling with regard to class needs to be made. Here case studies culled from such books as *Elm-town's Youth* could be carefully studied, and used as a basis for helping

students verbalize their attitudes toward class. Such study should be directed toward two ends: (1) helping students probe their own prejudices and rationalizations concerning class, and (2) helping students arrive at generalizations regarding people on a basis other than social class.

The teachers of America have made notable strides in the field of intercultural education, and have courageously attacked racial and religious prejudices. But in the area of human relations, the problem of social class has been largely untapped. It is hoped that educators will not shy away from this "hot" area, but will seek a solution through revised curriculum practices in both elementary and high schools of the nation.

Working to Learn

MILTON J. GOLD

"Learning about the world of work and learning about the world through work" is the theme of this article by Milton J. Gold, supervisor of curriculum in the Washington State Department of Public Instruction, Olympia. The author outlines a secondary school program which brings work experience into the general education of all school youth.

THIRTY OR FORTY three-year-olds tumble into a Brooklyn high school every morning. Precocious? No. Just a number of children whom the school serves while at the same time providing realistic experience for girls who are to be nurses, dieticians, playground assistants, domestic workers—and mothers.

In a high school operated by a Detroit automobile corporation, a boy works all week with machine tools molding replacement parts for the

tools and dies that assembly line workers will actually use in the auto plant. An instructor carefully guides the boy through a sequence of activities that will make him an expert machinist. Next week he will spend in the school building proper. He will be learning applications of mathematics, science, and shop theory from specially prepared texts. He will take a course in "technology" that includes in a sample week such things as the handling and processing of basic raw materials, trips

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