

# What Are Basic Learnings in Social Education?

Understandings that are considered fundamental to effective social competence in today's world are outlined and discussed in this article.

**R**ECENT CONFLICT over public education in the United States has focused attention on the teaching of fundamental skills in the schools. Too often the critics of education have identified the fundamentals they are concerned about as reading, writing and arithmetic. As important as these skills are, however, they are not sufficient for effective living in an industrial-urban culture or for effective citizenship in our present democratic society.

When the American public school system was established, the United States was still, to a large extent, a rural-handicraft culture. In the rural setting of early America, most children and youth developed social competence outside the school through active participation in small, face-to-face primary groups—by working, playing and worshiping alongside adults in the family and local neighborhood. But in the industrial-urban setting of contemporary America, where life is highly specialized and the primary group has been displaced largely by mass secondary organizations in the carrying out of basic social functions, children and

youth have little opportunity for direct participation outside the school in a wide range of social activities. Under these circumstances, the responsibility of the school in the development of social competence has increased greatly, and our conception of the fundamentals in social education has broadened considerably.

## Basic Objectives

The over-all aim of social education in the schools is to develop worthy family members, good citizens, efficient workers and individuals of high moral character. Most educators today seek to define this larger aim by stating objectives in terms of descriptions of behavior—both overt and covert. There is widespread agreement that the fundamental behaviors involved in social competence can be classified in three broad categories: (a) knowledge and understanding, (b) ideals and values, and (c) skills and abilities.

It would be a serious mistake to consider knowledge, values and skills as separate compartments in human personality. Human beings respond as total personalities to whole situations. Every learning experience has implications for the intellect, emotions and basic skills of the learner. For example, at the same time a child or youth is at-

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tempting to memorize the facts of American history, he also is developing attitudes toward it and establishing a pattern of study skills which will affect his further learning.

In describing a socially competent citizen in our industrial-urban culture, knowledge, values and skills can be expressed to show their interrelationships in the total personality of the learner. For example, a socially competent citizen can be described as one who:

1. Understands the changing world in which he lives.

2. Has values and ideals—conceptions of what *ought* to be—which give meaningful direction to his behavior.

3. Has the individual competence—within the limits of his potentialities—to participate in the world as it is in such ways as to more fully realize the values and ideals in which he believes.

This broad description of the socially competent citizen can be used as a basis for identifying the basic learnings which are essential to all children and youth today in the area of the social studies or social education.

### Understanding Our Changing World

The development of an understanding of our changing world involves a knowledge of its past, present and its probable future, of mankind's successes and failures, and his present challenges and problems. It involves American and world history and a knowledge of ways of living (economic, political, social and cultural) in the local community, state, nation and world today.

Some of the important understandings which all children and youth

should develop in the area of social education are:

1. The nature of human culture and cultural change and a realization that we are living in a rapidly changing culture.

2. The significance of the shift from a rural-handicraft to an industrial-urban culture in modern America.

3. The growing specialization and the increase in world interdependence.

4. The development of ideological conflict and the threat of totalitarianism to the free way of life.

5. The nature of American culture and the American way of life.

6. The significance of cultural differences and the reasons for them and a realization that American culture has been enriched by other cultures from practically all periods of human history and in all parts of the world.

7. The recognition of the world responsibilities of the American people and a realization of the responsibility of each American citizen to contribute to the building of good communities, and a peaceful and prosperous nation and world.

8. An understanding of the basic functions of human living, including the development and intelligent utilization of human and natural resources, the production and distribution of goods and services, transporting and communicating, expressing aesthetic and ethical impulses, recreating and playing, and organizing and governing.

These statements are illustrative of the kinds of understandings that are fundamental to effective social competence in the contemporary world. Of equal importance to the acquisition of broad understandings is the development of meanings for basic concepts which the citizen uses in learning,

thinking, writing and talking about current social affairs and problems. One of the serious dangers to freedom today is that many basic social concepts have tended to become separated from reality because the individual does not have sufficient opportunity for the direct participation which gives the concepts operational meanings. As a result, these key concepts may lose concrete meanings in terms of actual events and take on higher and higher emotional charges, so that the individual tends to respond to them primarily on an emotional rather than a rational basis. The danger here is that, if this process goes far enough, unscrupulous individuals and groups using current social-psychological knowledge and employing the mass media of communication may control the people of the world like puppets on strings through the manipulation of highly charged emotional symbols. This already has occurred in communist and fascist nations and has been vividly described by George Orwell in his novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

In the light of this situation, it is vitally important that social studies teachers give attention to the development of operational meanings for key social concepts. Among these concepts are: America, American, authority, business, citizenship, civil, communism, conservative, conservation, constitution, culture, democracy, fascism, freedom, individualism, liberty, patriotism, and the like. Participation in secondary groups is based largely on conceptualization, and, if citizens are to participate effectively in social affairs today, it is essential that they have clear and concrete meanings for the

symbols that are used to describe these affairs in the world in which we live.

### Developing Values and Ideals

Values and ideals are conceptions of what ought to be. They set standards for behavior and goals for achievement. The values of the United States have sprung from the Hebraic-Christian ethic and the democratic tradition of the western world, nourished by frontier living conditions and individual initiative. American values stress the sacred dignity of the individual and the importance of equality of opportunity and civil liberties. But Americans believe not only in the welfare of the individual, but also in the welfare of the group and cooperation among groups of equals as a way to solve common problems. We believe in the use of reason and have faith that if we do have mutual respect, equal opportunity, if we cooperate together, and use our intelligence, we can continue in the present and future, as we have in the past, to solve our problems and improve our way of life. These are basic values and ideals that we need to transmit through learning to all children and youth.

Values and ideals include not only standards for behavior and guidelines to the future, but also basic appreciations, interests and loyalties. We want to develop in young people an appreciation of the finest achievements of our culture in music, art and literature. We want to develop the broadest possible interests in economic, political, social and cultural affairs. And we want to develop basic loyalties to family, school, community, state, nation and all mankind.

## Basic Skills and Abilities

Individual competence may be characterized in terms of basic skills and abilities. It is based on knowledge and understanding and directed toward the realization of desired values and ideals. Basic social skills in which all children and youth should develop proficiency are: reading, writing, speaking, listening, observing, and using numbers. Some emphases that should be stressed in relation to these skills are:

1. In *reading*, special attention should be given to functional literacy—the development of word meanings as well as word recognition.

2. In *writing*, there is need for the ability to express complex ideas clearly and accurately; for example, particular attention should be given to such things as accurate note-taking, outlines and summaries of information, the interpretation of facts and the drawing of conclusions, and the writing of brief essays and letters on important current issues.

3. In *speaking*, there is need for developing the ability to discuss controversial issues calmly and objectively. Serious conversation is almost a lost art; yet, its revival is of great significance to the survival of freedom.

4. *Listening* and *observing* are social skills that have been seriously neglected in the school program. Adults today secure more of their information from listening and observing than from reading; hence, it is obvious that the development of those skills is vital to social competence and effective citizenship.

5. *Quantitative thinking* should be stressed in every way possible in the social studies program. Our culture rests largely on a quantitative base and anyone who cannot compute effectively and think quantitatively is seriously handicapped in social participation.

The most important ability in the area of social education is the ability to think critically. Social studies teachers have been stressing this ability increasingly during the past few years but much still remains to be done. Critical thinking involves such behaviors as: the recognition and analysis of a problem situation; the location, collection, verification, organization and interpretation of relevant information; and the formulation and application of conclusions to the solution of the problem.

There has been controversy recently concerning whether or not controversial issues should be considered in the social studies program. In the judgment of the author, the consideration of such issues is essential to effective social learning. A free society depends for its continuance on effective individual choices; and individuals can best develop the capacity to make effective choices, to think critically, by having the opportunity to practice problem-solving in the school.

To recapitulate, basic learnings essential for all children and youth in the area of social education include knowledge and understanding, values and ideals, and skills and abilities. There is much that children and youth need to learn in the area of social living, almost too much. Everything that needs to be learned cannot be taught in school, but the foundation can be laid there, and interests and self-direction can be developed that will enable the young citizen to continue his education for the remainder of his life, as he must in a rapidly changing and highly complex culture with many of its problems as yet unsolved.

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