

The SCHOOL UNIT in Modern Society

The individual school unit in our society has a unique responsibility. Recent social and economic trends have enhanced its opportunities and at the same time have increased the pressures upon it. This author analyzes some of these trends.

MODERN society has produced the school unit, supports it financially and emotionally, and unavoidably presents it with almost impossible demands. This school unit is a specific place where selected children from about six to eighteen years of age are required by state laws to spend a large share of their waking hours. The criteria used for selection have included such characteristics as age, sex, marital status, citizenship, test scores, health, physical or mental characteristics, place of residence, vocational aim, and many others.

The school unit is the place of employment for selected groups of adults who are paid to spend their time inducing changes in the behavior of the young who are assigned to them. The goals to which these behavioral changes should lead are chosen by the society, or the segment of society, which employs the adults. In non-democratic societies these goals may be set by

heads of states, by the employed adults themselves, or by some other part of the society. It has been observed that there is a strong resemblance between the traits of the employing adults and those which the employed adults are required to inculcate in the young. It does not necessarily follow that the young are expected to learn to resemble their teachers.

The society not only establishes the goals which the young are expected to reach, but also sets limits within which the teachers must select their techniques for inducing the required behavioral changes. The use of small electric shocks would probably be as effective in modifying behavior in children as in mice, but its use on children is unknown to the writer. It is possible that some court may decide, in years to come, that punishment by therapy is an invasion of the constitutional rights of slow learners.

The school unit is education to the average member of modern society. This is, in a sense, the plant, and the teachers are the workmen who are employed to produce acceptable be-

James W. Wiggins is chairman, Department of Sociology, Emory University, Georgia.

havior—regardless of the quality of the raw material furnished by society. It is fortunate, indeed, as Ralph Linton pointed out, that the average member of a society can learn most of the tasks required of any member.

The only part of the total educational enterprise which is directly experienced by all "normal" members of society is the school unit. This is where the people go for education; this is where they are taught.

The citizen's evaluation of the whole of education, therefore, is almost always an evaluation of one or more particular school units. He approves what happened to him when he was in school, he is impressed by the changes in his own school child, or he is pleased by the performance of his employees or fellow workers from a specific school unit. He may, on the other hand, complain that his teachers made no demands on him, that his child is not learning to read or to figure, or that his file clerk does not know the alphabet.

To the citizen, the bureaucratic structure superimposed on the school unit is invisible, often incomprehensible, and consequently may be considered indefensible. But this is not a special attitude toward the educational enterprise. Bureaucracy is seldom defensible to the outsider, whether in business, government or religion.

The use of *modern* society in the title of this article suggests that there are other kinds of societies. Some societies are not considered modern because they have no written language. Others are not modern because they had their lives in other historic epochs. It is not enough, however, to say that

modern society is literate and contemporary. If today's confusion in the demands made on the school unit is to be understood, other distinctive qualities of this society must be considered.

Movement and Change

Modern society is dynamic. Modern men are on the move, like ants in a disturbed hill. Great cities inhale millions of Americans each morning and sneeze them out every evening. Millions of families make local changes of address each year. In 1950 the U. S. Bureau of the Census reported that more than three million Americans born in the North were living in the South, and that more than five million born in the South were living in the North. Each time new census data become available, they show a greater percentage of Americans living in urban areas, so that today two out of every three can be called urban. The centuries-old westward movement has been accelerating in recent years.

Social change plagues modern society. Hydrogen bombs and cold wars are merely the latest in a long series of new conditions to which adjustments must be made. Before women had learned to smoke, they were told that cigarettes cause cancer. Before man was happy with income tax, the sales tax was added. Before man discovered a parking place for his car, jet planes were roaring. Even Dr. Kinsey's reassurance arrived before pre-marital chastity had become firmly established. If a hermit, after fifty years' isolation returned to the modern city today, he would probably run back in his cave. Indeed, modern man may ask the

hermit to move over in the cave if the latest technological marvel is unleashed.

Modern society has lost community. Its prominent processes, of mobility and social change, are divisive rather than cohesive. Sociologist Howard Odum believed that the kind of community experienced by the "folk" was essential to man. Anthropologist Ralph Linton described the disintegration of the local group as one of the most striking results of modern civilization. The dynamism of modern society seems so far to have destroyed community, the sharing of values which hold it together, and the function it served for its members. Civilized man is trying to re-establish something like community through a multitude of associations.

Democracy is a focal value in modern American society. Each individual member of society is held to be competent to make political and other decisions pertaining to his own welfare and that of society. He may, if he wishes, listen to the informed, but the decision is his. The patient decides whether to take the medicine. The client decides whether or not to sue. The moron on a jury may take the life of his peer. The civilian decides whether and where to fight a war. The citizen decides who shall rule the land.

Modern society is made up of minorities. This diversity, like social change, has become a positive value. At the very least these minorities include groupings based on culture, language, religion, morality, sex, race, social class, and economic roles. Since difference is a positive value—even

children are encouraged to "create"—those who are different are allowed to remain different, unless their difference is important. Differences which are not tolerated include opposition to compulsory education or vaccination, snake-handling religious rituals, individualized spelling, and polygynous marriage.

The School Unit Serves Society

If modern society is dynamic, plagued by change, democratic, and made up of minorities, what does this mean for the school unit which it created to serve its ends? Society demands many things of the school unit, but it does not demand *everything*. It is fitting at this point to consider some of the ways in which the school unit is required to serve society, as well as some of the things that school units do which are not in great demand. Since the unit ordinarily serves a particular segment of society, the school's society will be meant from this point on when the word, "society," is used.

The adults who are employed by society to work in the school unit are usually strangers. That is to say, teachers ordinarily work outside the neighborhood or area in which they were reared. A stranger is a foreigner, who views unfamiliar surroundings with untrained eyes. He feels uncertainty and discomfort because the cultural predictions he makes are wrong, and he is not familiar with the expectations others have of him.

There are two ways out of this discomfort, discounting running away. One way is for the stranger to remake his new surroundings so that they are

comfortably like those from which he came. The other way is for the stranger to become one with his new surroundings, to accept the values, attitudes and definitions he finds and make them his own.

Many of these adults in the school unit have not only their handicaps as strangers, but also Messianic urges. There must be some common source of this strong urge, but the present writer cannot completely identify it. From this urge comes the conviction that any change is a positive good, and change for change's sake becomes the slogan.

Modern society does not demand that the adults employed in the school unit decide what the employing adults should be. Nor does society insist that teachers tell the society how it should be organized. In fact, in a society so bedevilled by uncontrollable change, teachers may even have a special responsibility (and, it is hoped, special preparation) to examine the values of suggested changes closely.

Not *all* of the wisdom accumulated by man in his million years of experience can be discarded casually; just because it is traditional. There were great and good men before this generation. Surely revolutionary changes are not justified because somebody studied some of the experiences of thirty children (chosen because they were available), or a whole bunch of salivating dogs, or mice, or chickens.

It is very unlikely that society demands that teachers shall be psychotherapists or personality manipulators. In spite of the many magazine articles in recent years which have made everyone his own psychiatrist, most Ameri-

can children fall within a reasonable range of normality. The parents who read the articles are more disturbed. Some children, of course, need highly skilled help. Unfortunately there is little certainty shared by professional helpers as to what this help is. The recently published *Evaluation in Mental Health*¹ puts a searching light on this specialty. Modern society survives because of what people do, not what they feel.

Minorities may present problems in the school unit, and each unit in modern society has them. Since they are often organized, and highly vocal, they are more effective as pressure groups than their numbers would indicate. The public, tax-supported school unit is particularly vulnerable to minority pressures. As a matter of practical reality, however, there is hardly an action that a teacher might take which would not offend at least one minority. If the community's needs are to be met by the school, some part of the community must decide what the school is to do. If the choice is between the minority and majority, this writer favors the wisdom of the majority.

The extreme mobility of the members of modern society leads to another consideration. When the locations of the children change so rapidly, the construction of school buildings for eternity is not only ridiculous but also wasteful. No demographer can guarantee that more than one school generation will conveniently use a given building. The society needs more buildings, but it needs new buildings which,

¹ Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Washington, 1955.

after ten years, are as dispensable as facial tissues.

The school unit can serve best by helping the people it serves go where they want to go, or if it is their decision, stay where they are, through doing the best possible job of changing the behavior of children. The teacher has his share in the choice of goals and methods, as citizen, and as adult member of society.

The best school unit known to the writer is in a socially and culturally mixed area, but its motto is "Toward Community."

The principal of this school has had a quarter of a century of success because he has helped the people of the community to find their own way. He has not insisted that these urbanites change to meet the standards which prevailed in his rural origins. His professional knowledge has been a kind of capital for the community, but so have the special skills of many others in the area.

The adults employed in the best school unit I know believe that they are serving the community, not that the community is serving them.

MARY E. FERGUSON and HELEN R. ROUSE

Principal and Supervisor Help the New Teacher

Working together as a leadership team, the principal and supervisor welcome the new teacher and make induction into the school system a satisfying and challenging professional experience.

AN IMPORTANT consideration in building a strong educational program is the attention given the beginning teacher. Competent teachers are gilt-edged securities for any system. Therefore, time spent by the supervisor and principal with the beginning teacher pays in dividends to the child, the school and the community.

Atlantic City is a summer resort with many homes rented to care for the influx of summer visitors. This means that homes and apartments for

new teachers are seldom available until the week after Labor Day. For this reason it has not been possible to hold preschool workshops to help the new teacher. Therefore, the orientation of the teacher who is new to the system must be carefully planned by the principal and supervisor.

During the summer it is the practice of the supervisor and principal to send letters to the teachers new to the Atlantic City system welcoming them to the community and the school family.

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