

Social Learning in a Free Society

Increasingly we are recognizing the necessity to identify resources and to analyze needs in areas of social learnings.

IN PERIODS of rapid change and threats to accustomed ways of life, human beings are likely to seek ready-made scapegoats, and short-cuts to salvation. The times have underlined this point, both with regard to Russia and to the public schools. An astounding reversal in American thought in recent or post-Sputnik days has brought us from wholesale condemnation of Russia to an almost frantic clamor to turn out scientists and engineers in the Russian way. A tide of concern and criticism of American education, unprecedented in recent generations, has lately been channeled into calls for greater rigor, more selectivity, more science and mathematics, mass-production methods.

The truth is that the relationships of men and nations, the perceptions we have, the goals we seek, and our ability to understand ourselves and others—these are the social learnings which will determine our survival and development. How we think and feel provides motive power far greater and more decisive than how we split atoms.

What is good enough for Khrushchev is not good enough for America. We have a great technology, great scientists, and effective training for them. Yet we have something far beyond this, in the American ideal of equality of opportunity and

the notion that the state exists for man, not vice versa; that the full development of the human individual is the highest value of our social organization.

We try for the education of all our people. The state does not select 1 of 10 for advanced education as do the Russians—and as much of the Western world has done. Much is to be improved, continuously we may hope, but we can have confidence in the democratic way to be flexible and productive in science as in other fields. Our main problem is not how to educate for mass destruction or for developing nuclear power. It is how to educate in the social relationships which will enable us to reach the goals of a free society.

Needs of Our Time

Men are primitive still, and their social systems are groping. Governments are often too busy to think. Yet the course of social evolution is steadily toward more recognition of individual personality as our highest value; more freedom and equal justice for more people; more achievement through the use of many kinds of talent rather than through reliance on the single or authoritarian leader; more encouragement of searching curiosity, creativeness, the humane quality in living.

H. HARRY GILES is professor of education and is adviser to the graduate program in Human Development and Social Relations in the Department of Social Studies, School of Education, New York University.

We witness facts which indicate need for these directions of effort:

—the fact that the relatively new concept of education for all, which America was the first to institute, is sought throughout the world, and particularly among disadvantaged peoples;

—the fact of the momentary, though conceivably fatal, lack of symmetry in the development of physical science and technology over that of social relations practices;

—the spread of collectivism and the lessening of individual independence

—revolutions against old political and economic empires; and

—the survival of preatomic power politics in an age which calls for full use of new methods in the communications of peoples and the employment of space, time and resources.

We witness the power of ideas to move millions of colonial peoples. We see that creativeness is the essence of great engineering and research triumphs. We see war, which General MacArthur long since pointed out is outmoded, is "no longer a feasible instrument of national policy," absorbing many times the billions that peace and education cost.

We see teachers and administrators struggling to make education more truly professional while they are hampered by a current popular use of the schools as a scapegoat for national anxieties. We see Negroes in the U. S. A., 16 million of them, determined to live by the U. S. Constitution and supported in that determination by the U. S. Supreme Court, yet thwarted by some political leaders and lacking the help of others.

We witness the beginning of a new awareness of an interrelated world by service personnel who may have been the first in their families to go more than 50 miles from home, but at the same time, we see a tightening of restrictions on free exchange of persons. We have heard a long succession of cries for aid and understanding from oppressed people, beginning with the Russians themselves and not too long since in Hungary. Great moral issues have been raised for us by those who have appealed to this country as one which itself came into being by throwing off the yoke of a distant and autocratic government. We see in our own homes and communities that there is great need for, and that there is available for use, a great new store of research knowledge which can enable us to enhance the inherent drives for belonging and growth. Yet we persist in a thousand other uses which block such development.

In short, we glimpse a great horizon, lit with human promise, as we live in anxiety, and cling to fetishes.

Needed Emphases

The school, in such an era of anxiety and of genii-like power, can be an instrument of retreat, of flight into the past. The school can easily become involved in petty quarrels and attempts at self-justification. The school can muddle along.

But if the school is to contribute to a free society, to the best that is known about human development, it will be through the doing of a daily job that is informed and permeated with the best of modern knowledge on human development and social relationships. In such a school, there will be recognition of the points of focus, the needed emphases which the conflicts of our time have pointed out. Some of these points of

focus in social relations education are the following:

Subject Emphases

Race likeness and difference
Religious likeness and difference
National culture likeness and difference
Economic class problems and values
Sex differences
Age differences
The Oldtimer and the Newcomer
Family relationships

Process Emphases

Choice-making and participation
Experimental methods in problem-solving
Analytic processes
Creative processes
Social control—discipline, government, facilitation
Interpretation and expression
Increasing contact with the widest possible range of people, ideas, materials and methods.

It can be seen that these points of focus are widely applicable in planning the whole curriculum. There is no subject field which cannot make use of the processes.

Goals

Education that focuses on these matters, whether it be conducted in the social sciences, home economics, physical education, biology, mathematics or other classrooms will seek the following goals—goals which have been shown to be obtainable in extensive classroom tests:

Recognition and acceptance of difference and the contributions as well as the disadvantages of difference

Integration of differences within working groups in the classroom—of ethnic, temperament, intelligence, skill and leadership difference, for example—to the end of more productive association

Drawing stimulus and knowledge from a wide range of contact with people and materials, and learning to distinguish the

special case from the representative case

Adventure and exploration in a variety of forms of group organization and the encouragement of individual progress. A conception of every class and every interest group within a class as an opportunity for the study of social relationships and development

Better relationships between classes, grade levels, schools and the school and community

Learning and contributions to community, national and international living through free expression and discussion of contemporary questions, and through special projects

Faith in human intelligence to solve human problems

Understanding of the dynamics of behavior

Understanding the difference between authority and authoritarianism

Clarification of social purpose.

The Administrator and the Teacher

If it be truly attempted, a program of social learning of this kind requires administrators of perception and courage. Of its teachers it requires faith and understanding of the goals of a free society, and awareness and feeling for the issues which confront attempts to achieve that society. The teacher who is himself a practicing citizen, taking responsible part in political struggles and efforts for the social welfare, will obviously be far more highly aware of his own and others' prejudices, of the precise meanings of social issues, and of the time and skills required to improve the human lot. Thorough mastery of the content of his special field, and a knowledge of historical perspective go hand in hand with effective citizenship and professional contributions. Honesty and a desire for rigorous evaluation are requisites, and, with all the rest, these may be achieved best in a school where there is a sense of common cause and mutual

support between teachers, teachers and administrators, and school and community.

Sources of Help

Though they have not received the dramatic treatment that has been given to the physical sciences, the findings of social science research in the past 15 or 20 years have profound meaning for human relations and social development. Examples of such findings will be given briefly, and some suggested readings.

First, however, it is wise to recognize that while research can yield reliable and valid answers to many of our questions, research cannot and does not try to usurp the function of the philosopher and the artist. The synthesis of evidence and thinking necessary to establish the aims or directions in which we wish to go, and for which we wish to employ the best resources is left to us to borrow or develop. Each individual and each group, then, that undertakes work in the social relations field must necessarily begin with its own formulation of broad purposes and specific objectives.

In the democratic society, there are many sources from which we may derive aid in making these formulations. Among the founding fathers of our nation, Jefferson stands out as one who expressed most clearly the fundamental trust in humanity, and in the intelligence of the electorate to reach wise decisions. John Dewey's whole life as philosopher and educationist was devoted to elaborating a democratic faith and its rationale. W. H. Kilpatrick followed with clear indication of the implications of the democratic creed for school practices. There is likewise wide literature available on this subject, including yearbooks and articles published by professional organizations such as ASCD, the AASA, the ACEI, the ACE, the second-

ary and elementary principals associations and the social studies division of the NEA.

In short space it is not possible to illustrate in anything like adequate measure, the extent and quality of the research now available to aid the social relations educator. Some of the following, however, are concepts and researchers of immediate value to education for the goals given earlier.

First of all, field theory, as taken from physical science and translated into principles of human development by such psychologists as Wheeler and Perkins in America; and by Kurt Lewin—first in Germany and later in this country. The great contribution of field theory to our subject is in its establishment of the relatedness of all phenomena, physical or psychological, with such implications as the need to look for many forces or "causes" for behavior. Wolfgang Köhler and the whole school of Gestalt showed us, also, that what we perceive in learning and acting, is due to interplay between the environment and the individual or group, and receives always its special organization in each individual nervous system. Field theory also has given strength to the idea that development, the release of dynamic potential in human beings, depends on situations which allow and trigger such release. All good teachers know how true this is, and how important it is in facilitating all learning—that is, all self-teaching.

Sigmund Freud and other psychoanalysts have revealed the existence and the tremendous power of the submerged or unconscious feelings and motivations in each of us. Carl Rogers and the non-directive or client-centered school of psychotherapy have demonstrated the value of catharsis, and the power of the individual to grow in his emotional acceptance of reality and self. Gordon Allport

has made an exhaustive study and summary of personality: drives, styles of behavior, and many other aspects of being. Along with other psychologists, and with biologists and anthropologists, Allport has also investigated bigotry and prejudice—how these develop and how they damage both the individual and the social group.

Adorno and others, in their monumental study of the "authoritarian personality" have established the existence of rigid, fearful and aggressive types, who derive comfort from conformity and rejection of difference to what may become a pathological degree. Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead and other anthropologists have shown the vital, often dominant part that the culture plays in shaping our reactions and lines of development, even our ability to love and hate certain objects and persons. Dollard, Warner, Havighurst and Davis have made us realize the existence of caste and class lines throughout our culture, and the obstacles to free movement of mind and ability which these can place before us.

In the whole field of groups, group productiveness and group structure, the work of Helen Hall Jennings, Moreno, Lippitt, Lewin, Bradford and many others has led us to recognize that acceptance or rejection by the group plays a central part in development; that democratic group structure aids the growth of initiative and learning in ways that authoritarian or laissez faire leadership cannot; and that it is possible for any teacher to identify, by relatively simple means, the true leaders and the basic reactions (in feeling as well as intellect) of group members to the content and method of conducting classes.

A recently completed study by the present author, of apprentice teaching at Shady Hill School in Cambridge, Massa-

chusetts, may be of interest. Its findings show that nearly all of the whole body of apprentices studied, taken from a 21 year period, testified to the fact that the way of life of their associates there—the personal relationships—constituted the single most powerful influence on their professional development during the apprentice year. The Trager and Yarrow study of prejudice among primary age children in the Philadelphia schools showed that the teacher, as a human being, was the most important change factor. No one can doubt that in our relations to others, as these examples illustrate, and as is true from babyhood to old age, we find the chief determinants of what we seek and become. Knowing this, the wise teacher has always sought to establish such rapport, and such methods of group administration as will put fewest obstacles in the way of the seeking mind, and give maximum encouragement to all forms of learning.

The wise teacher uses constantly principles, now amply supported by research evidence, such as these: acceptance and belonging as necessary to growth; the recognition and understanding of difference; the primary need for self-respect if there is to be full progress; the natural eagerness to succeed, to do well; the facilitation of true learning by joint planning, joint evaluation and by inclusion of both group and individual studies; the giving of clear-cut function, status and recognition.

In every home, school and community, the vast number of problems which challenge the attention of the alert teacher in the realm of self-understanding and the understanding of others, forms an equally vast source of teaching desiderata in every subject and educational experience. Here we speak of the relationships between the deep demands of the human

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educational conditions in Nepal as they existed in 1954. The major part of the book, however, is devoted to a master plan for education in Nepal from the primary school level through the university level, including adult education. This section provides a thrilling example of educational planning on a large scale where there were few traditions and precedents to hamper the thinking of the group. The Commission set as its major goals: universal primary education in 25 years; adult education for all who desire it in 15 years; a national University in 10 years; improvement and expansion of secondary education; and teacher

training programs necessary to attain these goals. The final chapter is a review of the activities of the University of Oregon Contract Team which, working under the United States Operations Mission in Nepal, has been responsible for the development of the educational program thus far.

This book will be of particular interest to those concerned with teacher education, or comparative education, or those who are interested in a challenging story of our foreign aid program at work.

—Reviewed by CHARLES D. BYRNE, chancellor emeritus, Oregon State System of Higher Education, Eugene.

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organism, and the possibility that learning—both of subject and method—can occur at its best, as a means to continuing development.

The outcomes of social relations education will be infinitely varied, but the direction will be toward that freeing of the person from the narrow view and experience which may bring countless new ideas and techniques to the constructive resolution of the social conflicts of our time.

Suggested Readings

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