

Are Children in the Suburbs Different?

IT WAS only a few years ago that the schools were faced with the unprecedented stresses accompanying the mushrooming suburban population. As the number of suburbs and their residents multiplied, so did the problems of an economic, social and educational nature grow. Lay and school people alike shared in a concern for the kinds of experiences children were having in the limited, homogeneous life-space of the suburb.

Thoughtful observers of the mass exodus from city to outer rim of the metropolis decried the possible price in human values paid for more land and less noise and traffic. They wondered whether parents, in a rush to acquire better physical surroundings, might unwittingly have given up conditions which are conducive to significant social learnings for their children. Especially important in this regard are those opportunities more heterogeneous communities offer for the development of positive understandings and attitudes to-

ward likenesses and differences among people.

In an attempt to determine the role of the elementary school curriculum in educating for better human relations in a given community, a research project, conducted under the auspices of Teachers College, Columbia University, was undertaken in 1958.¹ During the initial stages of the study, attention was given to the nature of opportunities for social learning present in the community and available for utilization by the school.

An investigation of existing community conditions and curriculum practices in a changing suburb in the New York Metropolitan area revealed that while teachers were aware of opportunities for social learning which occur in informal school activities and in the planned program of instruction, they did not always recognize the educational possibilities inherent in children's everyday experiences in the home and community.²

A study designed to develop teacher awareness of children's needs for social learning constituted the next phase of the five-year project. Using projective techniques to elicit children's perceptions of other people and certain social institutions such as the family, school and community, the researcher hoped to demonstrate various means appropriate to the assessment of children's social learning as a basis for curriculum development and instruction. The findings of this study revealed a pattern of such

¹ The five-year study, known as "Schools in Changing Communities," was directed by Alice Miel and supported by the American Jewish Committee, the Joseph Fels Foundation, the Lederer Foundation, and the Ray and Charles Newman Foundation.

² Luther Flugler, "Schools in Changing Communities: The Initial Phase of the Study," Ed.D. Project, Teachers College, Columbia University. Typewritten, 1959.

striking uniformity in children's responses that the researchers were led to question whether the children in the community surveyed were unique or similar to elementary school children elsewhere.³

The third phase of the project, therefore, was a direct outgrowth of the previous investigations conducted in one suburban community. In order to test the findings of the initial investigators, a study was made of the similarities and differences among children of different backgrounds and from urban, suburban, and rural communities with respect to their expressed attitudes and perceptions in relation to themselves, their neighborhoods, and families. Responses were obtained from sixth grade children in the states of New York, Delaware and Michigan. Following is a report of this comparative study.⁴

1. Are urban, suburban, and rural children different?

The sixth grade boys and girls who responded to the questionnaire we administered tended to be similar in their responses. Almost three hundred children living in several suburbs in the New York Metropolitan area, a small city on the New York-Pennsylvania border, a large urban community in Delaware, and a large city and small farming community in Michigan wrote their replies to questions asking what they liked about themselves, their families, schools, and neighborhoods.

In addition, they gave their opinions regarding a problem involving new

³Audrey Dickhart. "Ways of Developing Teacher Awareness of Children's Needs for Social Learning." Ed.D. Project, Teachers College, Columbia University. Typewritten, 1961.

⁴Betty Psaltis. "Children's Views of Their Social Environment: A Comparative Study." Ed.D. Project, Teachers College, Columbia University. Typewritten, 1962.

neighbors and expressed their "Three Wishes." Analysis and comparison of these data revealed that it mattered little whether children lived in a suburb, rural area or in a city. Their responses were more alike than different.

2. What is important in a child's life-space?

When asked "What do you like about your neighborhood, family, and school?" most of the children replied in terms of the people in these situations. Although girls tended to mention people much more frequently than did boys, the most important thing in the neighborhood, family, and school to the majority of children was people. As already indicated, it mattered little whether it was a child replying from an upper-middle class eastern suburb or from a small mid-western town.

In relation to their neighborhoods, children mentioned both peers with whom they played and adults who seemed to understand and accept them. Repeatedly they mentioned playmates and the activities in which they engaged together and adults who did not interfere with their play or who helped them in one way or another. "My neighbor is very kind. She lets me borrow her books on nursing," and "I like my neighborhood because there are lots of kids to play with" are illustrations of the type of statements made.

With regard to their families, many children referred to those things they did together. Also mentioned were specific characteristics and behavior of parents and siblings. Examples of their re-

Betty Psaltis is Assistant Professor of Education, San Francisco State College, San Francisco, California; Alice Miel is Professor of Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York.

sponses are: "My parents are kind and we do everything together." "I like my family because it is a kind and loving family; neat and clean; take good care of our possessions."

More than half of the children responding mentioned that they like the people in their schools. Typical replies referred to "nice teachers," "good cooks," "my teacher because she fools around with you and you still get all your work done," and "the kids in my class."

When asked what they would like to see changed in their neighborhoods, families and schools, boys and girls tended to mention people much less frequently. Instead, they nominated for change a variety of nonhuman phenomena such as the house they lived in, the physical plant and routine of the school, the lawns on the block, and the noise made by cars driven by teen-agers at night.

3. *Are cleanliness and quiet highly prized?*

One of the questionnaire items consisted of a situation presented in a brief statement followed by two incomplete sentences. The statement described the case of a family deciding to move from their home upon the arrival of new neighbors next door. The children were asked to complete sentences which elicited their interpretations of the family's decision.

Although there was a diversity of explanations given, more than half of the children mentioned dirt and/or noise as reasons for the family's decision to move. Most of the children also condoned the family's reaction to "dirt" and "noise." A number of responses, however, reflected either ambivalence or disapproval of these reasons. Some of these responses were: "If we had neighbors

like that, I would want to move too." "They shouldn't have moved. They should have told the neighbors to be quiet." "Not very good reasons; should have given the neighbors a chance to settle down." The remainder of the children attributed social incompatibility and other undesirable traits and conditions to the new neighbors, or in some instances, mentioned exigencies of the family's situation which necessitated their decision to move.

Only seven of the three hundred children responding gave different race, religion or nationality as the reasons for the decision. Of the seven, six disapproved of these reasons. The one child who agreed stated that the new family spoke a different language and that "the Jones children might grow up to be like the neighbors."

Some Differences Emerge

When responses were compared according to several background variables such as parent occupation, education, religion, race, rank in a vocabulary test, and teacher's rating of adjustment, subtle differences began to emerge. Children whose parents were in the higher occupational levels, for example, stated more frequently than other children that they liked the people in their schools. Children in the lower levels consistently mentioned people less frequently in response to most questions except to indicate that they would like to see the people in the school changed more often than did the other children.

As in no other item in the questionnaire, children's wishes yielded more strongly differentiated results when compared according to the background variables applied in the study. Children whose parents were in the higher occu-

pational and educational levels, whose adjustment rating and vocabulary rank were higher, and white children made higher percentages of nonmaterial wishes than did other children.⁵ While responses of these children included wishes for material things, most of them made two wishes in the nonmaterial category and one for a material object. Typical of this pattern of wishes are the following:

Child A: "World peace. Have a car. That poor people could have more money."

Child B: "Go to college. Get a good wife. Get a good job."

Child C: "Be a good lawyer when I grow up. Be rich. Have a big part in rocket experiments."

Besides making predominantly nonmaterial wishes, children whose parents were in the higher occupational and educational levels seemed to have loftier education aspirations. The wishes of children in the lower socioeconomic levels reflected a lack of certain basic necessities of life such as adequate housing, food and clothing. Further specific differences were noted. While children from the higher levels wished for large or unqualified amounts of money, those from the lower levels specified small amounts such as "\$1 or \$2."

While our data showed certain variations among children according to their different backgrounds, no major regional differences were noted. Neither did type of community lived in seem to play a part in the responses. The answer to the question raised by the findings of a previous investigator in the five year study

is that apparently children in all types of communities—suburban, urban, and rural—generally make similar verbal responses. Geographic and social mobility of the American population and mass media of communication, carrying the urban culture into every home in the nation, seem to have fostered a highly homogeneous society.

Tracing the population shifts in the past two decades, Lerner has concluded that suburbia, with its inhabitants coming from all other types of communities, is indeed middle class America.⁶ He suggests that the former individualistic way of life with its usual concomitant isolation has been replaced by a community way of life for which the price has been standardization and conformity. Our study findings seem to support this observation. Today's Americans are becoming essentially more and more alike whether they are growing up in a suburb or not.

Suburban children studied in the initial phase of the project seemed to place a high value on achievement and cleanliness, and revealed a rigid adherence to certain standards of dress and behavior. Our findings indicate that these children, with some modifications, might be said to be representative of all American children. Not only are dominant "American values recognized, however implicitly so far as verbalization is concerned, by virtually all adult Americans,"⁷ but sixth-grade children have already internalized the dominant values of the culture—or so their verbalizations would indicate. Since the school has traditionally been

⁶ Max Lerner. *America as a Civilization*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957. p. 176.

⁷ Clyde Kluckhohn. "Have There Been Discernible Shifts in American Values During the Past Generation?" Elting Morrison, editor. *The American Style: Essays in Value and Performance*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958. p. 147.

⁵ Jewish children in this study made a higher percentage of nonmaterial wishes than did other children, but it appeared that this particular finding was a function of occupational and educational level.

the formal agent for inculcating middle-class mores and values, in the young, this information is by no means surprising. What gives us cause for concern, however, is the fact that while most children have learned to say the same thing, the experiences of a large segment of the school population are highly inconsistent with their verbalizations. Children's wishes, for example, demonstrated the influence of an individual's unique life situation upon his outlook on life and what he wants from it. It was apparent that the nature of objects mentioned by children in their wishes reflected the backgrounds out of which they responded.

When one looks beneath the surface of culturally approved statements, one is likely to discover, as we did, widely divergent frames of reference out of which verbal responses are made. Especially poignant in this regard was the relationship found in this study between parents' occupational level and children's attitudes toward school. The dissatisfaction with the middle-class culture of the school on the part of children in the lower social classes has long been decried. Critics point out our educational system's seeming violation of the democratic belief in equal opportunity for all. Yet the gulf between the values taught in school and the real-life experiences of a large number of children still remains.

What we have been saying may appear paradoxical. And indeed it might be. On the one hand, we found children from divergent backgrounds making strikingly similar statements in response to our queries. These were twentieth-century American children speaking. The characteristics of their particular stage of development, preadolescence, played a role in their views.

The dominant cultural values of our times, whether transmitted through television, press, home, place of worship, school or otherwise, are reflected in their responses. Yet, it was apparent in the replies that, "plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone who ever lived, lives, or will live."⁸ Though commonality of experience was evident among our young respondents, differences, sometimes almost imperceptible and at other times quite obvious, were nevertheless expressed.

That varying lines of differentiation do exist has been pointed out by most students of the American culture. These observers have been alert to the paradoxes and inconsistencies in the American value system.

"Most Americans have most valuations in common," an early observer declared, "though they are arranged differently in the sphere of valuations of different individuals and groups and bear different intensity coefficients."⁹

Our findings have demonstrated, among other things, the effectiveness of a whole constellation of educative media in standardizing young children's opinions and attitudes. The school has contributed its share in the achievement of such homogeneity. If now, in a world with new problems, the full development of individual potential is seen as desirable, there is need for the same creativity and resourcefulness in moving in that direction as were employed when our national goals seemed to necessitate the fostering of likeness.

⁸ Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. p. 8.

⁹ Gunnar Myrdal. *The American Dilemma*. Vol. 1. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944. p. xliv.

Copyright © 1964 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.