

THE KINDERGARTEN: Social System and Laboratory

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WHAT is the place of the kindergarten in the elementary school? What can it do and what does it actually do for children? It is immediately apparent that a singular point of view cannot fully answer these questions. With the various fields of specialization and numerous perspectives or disciplines has come an enlargement of the context for analysis in examining the schoolroom and its pupils.

The Unspoken Pull

As a social system of its own, the kindergarten is influenced by several factors. The first factor, pertaining to space and geography, points up differences in the way these elements can function. For example, some classrooms which have ample yard space supplementing them and assistants for the teacher permit a wide range of physical activity, and a variety of materials for both vigorous and less active experiences. Where space is limited, opportunities for roaming and exploring are accordingly decreased; and where land is expensive, as it is in many urban areas, school space is of lesser proportion.

A second aspect of the social system in the kindergarten is the number of children who populate it. The amount and quality of time the teacher can devote to the children individually is related to the number of pupils in daily attendance. The "play," as adults view children's activities in kindergarten, consists in carefully designed programs which have specific purposes and functions within an educational rationale. The new kind of responsibility which a child needs to learn at school evokes some awareness that he has to count on himself. The teacher will help him with some tasks, but for the most part he has to initiate behavior or his life at school will become complacent and dull.

The number of children the teacher can observe generally and at the same time direct the heart of the activity itself requires some anticipation of the kind of interaction which might occur once the teacher presents the idea to the pupils. For this reason the activity planned for the children must be geared to the numbers who will be participating in it.

A third consideration in a social system is an awareness of rules. The kind of learning which facilitates knowledge of classroom group membership involves awareness of rules of procedure where formal type organization is concerned, and norms or general expectations where informal groups are concerned.

In the kindergarten, the formal and informal groups are not greatly differentiated. Even the description of formality and informality depends on the different kind of structuring a teacher may prefer. A wide range of formality occurs within an entire set of plans in a teacher's weekly program whether she is aware of it or not.

In a recent study of children's awareness of norms it was found that those in a permissive classroom knew less about rules than those in the more highly structured classroom (one which had a greater number of activities involving participation of the total class). The question arises as to whether it is of greater benefit to children to learn about group norms or whether it is of greater importance educationally that they perform individually in tasks of their choice.

The value of the individual in our American culture and the responsibilities which will be faced by children as they mature has led educators to decide that the democratic classroom will inculcate democratic habits and attitudes. This premise is well taken. In the kindergarten, however, where young children approach the school situation, which is for some the first time, their experience in a democratic group experience with their peers is almost pre-embryonic. The nature of children's

knowledge in the direction of democracy needs to be examined.

Organization in the classroom, especially in the earlier grades, is almost completely initiated in the hands of the teacher. Where, at what time, and how certain activities will be conducted are elements which implicitly control classroom demography and the children's responses. A teacher need not be solely permissive or consistently inhibiting to children; in fact the wider repertoire of controlling behaviors she has, the greater range of possibilities she can draw upon when she anticipates a particular type to be most effective.

In any case, it appears that children's behavior in kindergarten does not become system oriented unless the teacher intervenes. Children who struggle from the core of the class are willing to stay away unless they feel the unspoken pull toward the group. They do not feel "left out" until the group becomes a strong enough organizing factor within themselves to create that kind of personal vacuum for them. It is not a "natural phenomenon." As adults we take for granted this desire to "belong" to a group, but this is not an automatic "given"; it is a developed result. Kindergarten children do not yet seem to care whether they "belong" or not.

A fourth aspect in a kindergarten social system is its range of acceptable behaviors. Because school is new to many children in the kindergarten, teachers are usually lenient in terms of behavior. Expected behavior is viewed in a relative sense such that a continuum from required, accepted, and minimally accepted may be described. For example, the teacher requires certain

behavior and will not tolerate deviation from it; some behaviors are merely accepted and not commented on as acceptable or not, and some are only minimally accepted.

Certain behavior types are accepted according to duration, frequency or intensity of the act. If a child were to act physically aggressive toward his peers, the intensity, frequency and duration of the act would dictate the kind of counteraction the teacher would take. Throughout all of this, however, is the underlying idea that the offender is a child and is learning how to curb his impulses; sometimes, therefore, his behavior is viewed as testing his environment; at other times, it is viewed as a release of hostility and frustration.

A fifth consideration in the social system of a kindergarten is group goal orientation. The children do not seem to have a collective orientation toward goal attainment specific or significant to their group; classroom goals are the teacher's. The teacher plans comments in certain situations so that what he *says* the children *want* to do will in fact *become* what they want to do. It is hoped that they will begin to internalize the standards and goals suggested to them. In this case, then, the social system does not have its own goals but rather objectives which have been supplanted by the teacher who is not a part of the peer group.

A sixth aspect of concern in a social system is related to leadership patterns. These are obscure and unstable for the most part; certain children are aggressive and outgoing but they are not necessarily the ones who influence others to follow them at play. If children in kindergarten are asked who is liked

by everyone, about 75% answer they don't know or will mention one child they play with frequently.

A seventh property of a social system is the means of communication which facilitates an identity for the group. When individuals interact frequently, and expected behavior and standards begin to emerge as understood among them, those predictable and accepted behaviors serve as a unifying element. The unity attributes a characteristic of identity, that is, certain behaviors are expected in this group that are not expected in others. Special significance in relation to certain gestures or expressions endows meaning to this particular group of individuals. Kindergarten children do not indicate an awareness of consensus; this is probably a result in part of their autonomy in most transactions of their affairs. The teacher may not implant consensus; this is a developmental process. It is interesting that the children do not seem to sense group agreement. They function individually.

Small Group—Large Group?

Differences in behavior which arise as a result of small group or larger group interaction suggest that both kinds of structuring have their place in kindergarten. Although some teachers are presently using both they feel guilty about it. Since the approval and continuing endorsement of democratic procedures is well known, teachers are confused when they use any procedure which seems to deviate from this. They refer derogatorily to any colleague who conducts a classroom which may resemble an autocratic one. The label carries with it diffuse notions of rigid conform-

ity allowing few exceptions for individual deviation.

Recognition and acceptance of a wider range of teacher controlling behaviors are needed; democratic and autocratic climates need not be labeled and dichotomized to the end that we confuse kindness and harsh treatment as synonymous with or as inseparable aspects of each control pattern. Teachers may begin subsequently to think of their style of control in relation to a particular kind of activity rather than identifying control so closely with their own personality characteristics. The professional aspect of teaching emphasizes behaviors relevant to a certain role. It does not emphasize behaviors such as those involved in intimacy.

Teacher Behavior

It is easier to talk with a teacher, particularly when one is in a supervisory position, about situation and task requirements rather than his personality weaknesses in classroom performances. Defensiveness is not as prominent in such discussions. Depersonalization which gives the environment major emphasis leads to professionalization which in essence minimizes personality concomitants. A clearer and sharper differentiation between personality and role provides a greater number of specific task focuses in an unlimited number of contexts. Greater professional mileage can be gained by this kind of dichotomy than can be gained in the classification of personality qualities.

The behavior of teachers is highly visible to pupils, administrators, parents, and colleagues; it is important, therefore, that teachers know they do not need to classify themselves as permissive or restrictive. They may be one or the other and gradations between as they think the situation demands. This may relieve self-imposed pressures to meet the overwhelming prevalence of literature on the benefits of democratic classroom behavior; it can contribute vitally to their mental health.

Thus from studying the social system of the kindergarten and the freedom from consensual standards, we have noted that a wide range of alternative control patterns may be recommended to teachers. The major emphasis is on the environment, the task at hand, and the professional requirements which proliferate the teaching role. Teachers may adapt their behavior to different patterns appropriate to the specific teaching task. Since children in kindergarten are beginning to learn how to act in a total classroom group, the teacher has to structure at times to facilitate participation in a total group setting, and at other times can permit freedom to pursue tasks individually. The teacher is not acting either democratically or autocratically; she is incorporating many control patterns and adapting to what seems most appropriate at that time. She need not feel guilty about employment of one way or another; she is exercising greater flexibility and judgment in the context of her professional role.

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