



Photo: CBS.

# The Societal Curriculum and the School Curriculum: Allies or Antagonists?

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*Students learn from many sources. Educators need to become aware of what is being taught by television and other societal "teachers."*

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Schools are not education. They are only part of education. When curriculum is mentioned, most people think of the *school curriculum*, whether manifest or hidden. In reality, however, two curriculums operate side by side. In addition to the education we receive in school all of us receive a lifelong education through the *societal curriculum*.

What is the societal curriculum?<sup>1</sup> It is that massive, ongoing, informal curriculum of family, peer groups, neighborhoods, mass media, and other

<sup>1</sup> I introduced this concept in: Carlos E. Cortés, Fay Metcalf, and Sharryl Hawke. *Understanding You and Them: Tips for Teaching about Ethnicity*. Boulder, Colorado: Social Science Education Consortium, 1976. p. 2.

socializing forces that "educate" us throughout our lives. For example, as one important component of the societal curriculum, television has been receiving increasing scholarly attention.<sup>2</sup> One study reported that young people age 12 to 18 spend one-fifth of their waking hours in front of the television set.<sup>3</sup> According to another estimate, by the time of graduation, the average high school senior will have spent 12,000 hours in the classroom and 15,000 hours in front of the television set. In other words, in terms of direct contact hours, teachers may be 20 percent behind the tube—and television is only one aspect of the societal curriculum.

What about the impact of the societal curriculum? In 1975, social psychologist George Comstock reported that there had been more than 2,300 research papers on television and human behavior. According to Comstock:

Several writers have argued that television is a powerful reinforcer of the *status quo*. The ostensible mechanisms are the effects of its portrayals on public

Photo: CBS.



expectations and perceptions. Television portrayals and particularly violent drama are said to assign roles of authority, power, success, failure, dependence, and vulnerability in a manner that matches the real-life social hierarchy, thereby strengthening that hierarchy by increasing its acknowledgement among the public and by failing to provide positive images for members of social categories occupying a subservient position. Content analyses of television drama support the contention that portrayals reflect normative status.<sup>4</sup>

One of my research interests is the societal curriculum on ethnicity and culture. What is being "taught" about culture and ethnicity in the societal curriculum?<sup>5</sup> What is that curriculum's impact on what people "know" about ethnicity and ethnic groups? How does the multicultural societal curriculum affect beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, and behavior related to ethnic groups? How does it support or limit the effectiveness of school multicultural education? What are the implications for schools, including school curriculum development?

Studies have shown that many children develop well-formed attitudes about members of ethnic groups, including prejudices and stereotypes, by the time they reach school.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, the media have a particularly powerful impact, often outweighing personal experience. In one study, white children said TV comedies like *Sanford and Son* and *The Jeffersons* accurately portrayed black family life, even when they admitted that such shows contrasted with personal experiences with their own black friends. They thought their friends were exceptions!<sup>7</sup>

Moving to a global context, a survey of

<sup>2</sup> For example, see: Robert Singer and Robert Kazdon, editors. "Television and Social Behavior." *Journal of Social Issues* 32; Fall 1976.

<sup>3</sup> A. M. Rubin. "Television in Children's Political Socialization." *Journal of Broadcasting* 20:51-59; Winter 1976.

<sup>4</sup> George Comstock. *The Impact of Television on American Institutions and the American Public*. Honolulu: East-West Communication Institute, East-West Center, 1977. pp. 20-21.

<sup>5</sup> For various filmic perspectives on this topic, see: Randall M. Miller, editor. *Ethnic Images in American Film and Television*. Philadelphia: The Balch Institute, 1978.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see: Mary Ellen Goodman. *Race Awareness in Young Children*, second edition. New York: Macmillan, 1964.

<sup>7</sup> Bradley S. Greenberg. "Children's Reactions to TV Blacks." *Journalism Quarterly* 49:5-14; Spring 1972.



fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders found that television had the greatest impact on their attitudes toward foreign nations and peoples. In a recent social studies assessment conducted by the California State Department of Education, seventh-grade students in 65 California public schools were asked to select one of four answers to, "Which of the following is an example of an ethnic group in the United States?" Fourteen percent selected "The United Auto Workers," 24 percent each answered "All the people who live in the same town" and "The Chinese," and 34 percent answered "People on welfare!" The societal curriculum had done its job.

### For Better or for Worse

Whatever the subject matter or theme, the societal curriculum probably has both positive and negative educational effects. For example, the showing of *Roots* was probably a major contribution to general understanding of the black experience. In contrast, other aspects of the multicultural societal curriculum, whether intentionally or unintentionally, have had such negative effects as heightening prejudice or reinforcing stereotypes. Indicative of the media's negative educational potential was NBC's repeated cautioning of the audience during its fall 1977 showing of *The Godfather Saga* that:

"The Godfather" is a fictional account of the activities of a small group of ruthless criminals. The characters do not represent any ethnic group and it would be erroneous and unfair to suggest that they do.

This gratuitous and totally ineffective posturing probably did little to soften the film's effect on perceptions about Italian Americans. However, it dramatized an awareness of the power of the multicultural societal curriculum.

While my discussion has focused on multicultural education, obviously the societal curriculum educates continuously about almost every subject—although we cannot be sure what each person "learns" from that curriculum. Citizenship, career, law-related, medical, environmental, global, consumer education—these are only examples of the various societal curriculums. What, then, are the implications for school educators? Should we view the societal curriculum as an



Photo: ABC.

antagonist? Should we unite with it as an ally? I would say both. The worst thing we can do is ignore it.

### Recommendations

I would like to make four recommendations related to the societal curriculum. First, an examination of the societal curriculum should be an integral part of both teacher education and inservice training. Second, teachers should constantly consider the societal curriculum in the planning and implementation of school curriculum. Third, teachers should use the societal curriculum as classroom material. Fourth, schools should help students become "literate" in the societal curriculum.



Photo: ABC.

1. *The societal curriculum as an element of teacher education*—Whenever I present inservice courses on multicultural education, I ask teachers to keep a “societal curriculum journal” on culture and ethnicity—a record of the education on ethnicity they observe outside of school being given by such “teachers” as conversations with family and friends, newspapers, television, motion pictures, advertisements, and even bumper stickers. Even the most aware teachers express surprise about the amount of multicultural education going on in the societal curriculum. This awareness training helps teachers develop an understanding of the societal influences on their own and their students’ beliefs and attitudes about ethnicity and ethnic groups.

Clearly, the study of the societal curriculum is equally applicable to most other subjects. For

example, I have used a similar approach in workshops on global education and law-related education. There I address such questions as what does the societal curriculum “teach” about different nations or the function of law-related institutions. In short, the societal curriculum can be an integral part of all teacher education.

2. *The societal curriculum as an aid to curriculum planning and implementation*—To teach without considering the implications of the societal curriculum is to operate in a land of make believe. Students learn from the societal curriculum (although we can never be sure what each one has learned about each subject), and that learning affects their formal education. The skilled teacher can and should build from that societal learning.

For example, when I introduce the study of an ethnic group, I first explore with students what they already “know” about that group as well as how they “learned” it. A teacher in one of my courses, when beginning an elementary-school unit on gypsies in a city with a sizable gypsy community, found that her students had deeply-rooted preconceptions. When the teacher asked where they had learned so much about gypsies, they responded with answers ranging from “my folks” to “Wolfman movies.” Bizarre? Then consider a high school teacher in Massachusetts who was presenting a unit on the Holocaust. When exploring her students’ previous knowledge on the subject, she discovered, “Their only encounter with Nazis, it seemed, was while watching *Hogan’s Heroes* on television.”<sup>8</sup> Through the classroom examination of student societal learning, whatever the topic, the skilled teacher can both increase student awareness and build curriculum in relation to existing student perceptions.

3. *The societal curriculum as classroom material*—Feature films, commercial television, newspapers, magazines, and advertising can be a stimulating and significant part of the school curriculum. So what’s new? Haven’t teachers been using films, for example, for decades? True, but how and how well? Sometimes quite well, but too often simply as surrogate teachers, as substitutes for the written word, or as spoken text-

<sup>8</sup> Roselle Chartock. “A Holocaust Unit for Classroom Teachers.” *Social Education* 42:278-85; April 1978.



books from which students are asked to memorize uncritically and recall factually. Visual media, in particular, should not be used simply as textbooks to learn from. Rather, in the classroom they should be examined critically, including their significance as a reflection of society.

Pioneering work in this area has been done by organizations such as Prime Time School Television. In its course, "Television, Police, and the Law," students analyze law-related television series for their depiction of the activities of law enforcement agencies and compare these depictions with legal guidelines for such agencies.<sup>9</sup> In our film-and-history courses at the University of California, Riverside, Leon Campbell and I adopt a multiple perspective strategy.<sup>10</sup> We select specific themes—economic dislocation and human migration, the conflict between law and justice, the significance of the frontier—and show several films that present alternative and sometimes conflicting perspectives on those themes. We then ask students to identify the filmmakers' perspectives, to analyze their techniques for influencing the viewer, and to compare these perspectives with those of the assigned written material. The societal curriculum should be used in the classroom, then, to increase critical awareness and analytical ability.

4. *The societal curriculum as part of student "literacy"*—Schools should help students become "literate" in the societal curriculum. A major goal of schools is to prepare young people for the future. That future will be in a world of media, particularly the visual media. One recent survey indicated that 65 percent of college graduates considered television, not newspapers or magazines, as their major source of news. Therefore, while helping students develop their capacity for literacy in the written language, we should simultaneously be striving to strengthen their "media literacy."<sup>11</sup>

Long after students leave school, they will continue to learn from the societal curriculum. How well are schools preparing students to deal with that curriculum—to be aware of it, to comprehend it, to analyze it, and to resist its more noxious effects? We can make the societal curriculum our educational ally. By ignoring it, we can guarantee that it will in many respects be our

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educational antagonist. By helping students to develop societal curriculum literacy, we will be contributing to their becoming more aware, sensitive, and effective citizens of the future.

<sup>9</sup> Prime Time School Television. *Television, Police, and the Law*. Niles, Illinois: Argus Communications, 1977.

<sup>10</sup> Carlos E. Cortés, Leon G. Campbell, and Alan Curl. *A Filmic Approach to the Study of Historical Dilemmas*. Riverside, California: Latin American Studies Program, University of California, 1976.

<sup>11</sup> See: Carlos E. Cortés and Leon G. Campbell. "Forward to Basics: Teaching Media Literacy Through the Social Studies." *The Link* 1:1-3; November 1977.



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