

EDITORIAL

Socialization: What Can the Schools Do?

B. Othanel Smith

More youth are being schooled today than at any other time in the life of our nation. Seventy-five percent are completing the public school program.¹ If the accomplishments of our schools are viewed against an ideal, there is room for criticism. But, when the current situation is compared with that of 75 years ago, when only 10 percent finished high school, there are ample grounds for satisfaction. Nevertheless, there is widespread discontent about the competency and conduct of youth.

The Ostracizing of Youth

Complaints about youth are not new. In a little-known book published in the 1920s, Coe² listed the faults of that era's youth: "Craze for excitement, immersion in the external and the superficial, lack of reverence and respect, disregard for reasonable restraints in conduct and for reasonable reticence in speech, conformity to mass sentiment—'going with the crowd,' lack of individuality, living merely in the present, and general purposelessness." For today's youth we can add extravagant admiration of and commitment to cults and their leaders; drug abuse; wanderlust; and vandalism, violence, and crime in both school and community. Of course, these faults cannot be attributed to all youth. The great majority are still level-headed and dependable. But the number of wanton boys and girls is becoming alarmingly large.

It is easy to blame schools for the faults of youth. The public has grown accustomed to the notion that schools shape the young. If they turn out to be misfits, it is only natural to believe there is something wrong with schools. Even some educational leaders appear to accept this all-too-easy answer. We often are told that most shortcomings of youth would go away if the school environ-

ment were more stimulating, teachers more humane, the curriculum suited to the needs of youth, instruction personalized, and parents and youth themselves were involved in shaping the policies and programs of the school. But there are good reasons to think otherwise, although these features are not without merit. Adults—parents, as well as the working community—have all but shut out the young from responsible participation in the activities by which the community improves and maintains its life. The faults of youth are natural reactions to this ostracism.

Personal Responsibility in a Blameless Society

Saying that the adult community is responsible for the plight of youth does not exonerate youth themselves. To become mature is to become increasingly accountable for individual decisions and actions. That is not easy in a society that daily becomes freer of personal blame, a society where the feeling of personal responsibility is waning. If an individual fails in school or life, or resorts to malignant behavior, so the argument runs, the system and not the individual is to blame. The family, the community, the school, the courts, the economic system, or poverty is to blame.

A society that constantly depreciates personal responsibility for conduct and well-being will in the end weaken its moral fiber. In a welfare society, the problem of finding a balance between individual and social responsibility is of primary importance. In our efforts to improve the socialization of the young that problem should not be overlooked.

¹ Robert L. Thorndike. *Reading Comprehension Education in Fifteen Countries*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973.

² George A. Coe. *What Ails Our Youth?* (Out of print).

Conditions are sometimes so overwhelming that only a few individuals can overcome them. This is the predicament of many young people today. The young have always sought to make their own way and in doing so have typically evoked criticism from their elders. Young people now live in different circumstances from those of any past generation. For the first time, at least in recent history, the adult society has no use for its young except as consumers and objects of affection. Like pets and retirees, youth receive the benefits of society without sharing in its productive activities. This is burden enough for the elderly who have already made their contribution, but it is demoralizing to young people.

The Enforced Idleness of Youth

The mechanization and automation of production and almost every other aspect of our life, together with minimum wage laws, federal welfare policies, and child labor laws, have created mass idleness among the youth of school age and beyond. Technology has also changed the home from a producing to a consuming institution, thereby reducing its formative influence. Because of this, the young are thrown upon their own meager resources at just the age when the developing human is most susceptible to the influences of moral and physical degeneration. In their efforts to save children from the degrading effects of child labor, adults have created an idleness which may be even worse in its moral effects.

The Need to Feel Needed

Faced with an alarming increase in mental aberrations and waywardness among the young, some psychologists and educational leaders are exhorting parents and teachers to become more affectionate toward children. If children are remote and unresponsive, it is because they lack

association with sensitive, understanding, and affectionate adults. "Have you hugged your child today?" asks the bumper sticker. No one can condone child abuse or doubt the benefits of humane parents and teachers in the life of the child or adolescent. But the troubles of youth are not rooted in lack of affection so much as in the lack of need by adults. Meeting the needs of youth today means satisfying their need to be needed—needed in the sense that a mechanic is needed to repair an automobile, or a physician because of illness. In earlier days youth were constantly needed and that gave them a feeling of dignity and personal worth. Today many young people feel useless.

Schools by themselves can do little to evoke the feeling of being needed. Schoolwork is interesting and stimulating to many, but youth know that they are mostly serving themselves when they study. If their work is done to satisfy the teacher, it runs counter to the doctrine of intrinsic interest. Thus the current ideal motivation for learning complements youth's isolation by turning them inward for their source of satisfaction.

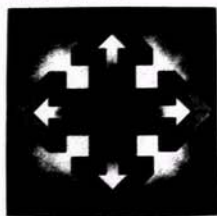
What Can the School Do?

The assimilation of youth into society is a social function about which little is known. Until recently, socialization occurred almost automatically through involvement in the enterprises and institutions of the community. Deliberate methods of socialization have barely been conceptualized, and programs are often ill-formulated and poorly-executed.

Nevertheless, the education community has not been inattentive to the youth problem. During the great depression, educators were keenly aware of the "lost generation." It was then that the concept of the community school surfaced, and youth involvement in community problems advanced

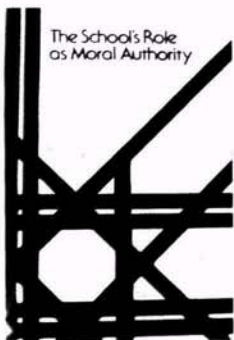
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from an abstraction to reality. Today the school provides, although to a limited extent, cooperative work programs and youth participation in a number of community activities. Through community schools some youth and adults are being brought together in joint enterprises and activities.

Although these developments are highly desirable their value would be greatly enhanced if they were rooted in a comprehensive program of socialization. To that end leaders of the profession, especially curriculum workers, should bend their efforts. Bold and comprehensive measures are called for; measures that embrace the ideas, commitments, and energies of leaders in labor, business, professions, agriculture, religion, government, sports, and whatever.

Where youth councils do not exist, they should be established. Where they exist, they need to be enlivened with a new sense of urgency and direction. Their membership should be expanded, where needed, to include leaders of all the occupations and social segments of the community. Within this context, the role of the school in the socialization of youth can be sorted out from the roles of other sectors of the community and defined in terms of the school's resources and personnel. Educational leaders can help adults see more clearly youth's predicament, and their responsibility for alleviating it. They can initiate movement to modify federal policies and laws affecting youth.

The socialization of youth cannot be accomplished by piecemeal approaches, nor can it be realized by assigning it to the school or any other single agency or enterprise. The renewal of formative influences on youth requires a plan in which every occupation and social group plays a part and every youth is affected. An operational structure must be worked out that makes socialization again an inseparable feature of community life.



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