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Sociology Contributes to Analysis and Understanding of the Educative Process

This article indicates some of the many practices in American schools that reflect "basic sociological contributions to our understanding of child development, the learning or educational process, and the social setting of the school."

THROUGHOUT the half century or more in which American sociology has developed, various students in the field exhibited an interest in the field of education. In the early decades of this century, several sociologists sought to develop an applied educational sociology. Some of these saw sociology as the field which would provide education with goals or ends which envisioned better society. Lester F. Ward thought of education as the ameliorative institution, and much of his sociology was concerned with pointing the direction of social improvement. In contrast with some of his predecessors and contemporaries, Ward recognized the process of social change and considered public education the primary means of directing change for the benefit of society. This conception of education was in harmony with and reinforced the significant American values associated with progress. Many educators, drawing heavily upon the contributions of such early thinkers as Ward, have adopted the philosophy that education is the molder of society and director of social change.

Growing out of the belief that education is a means of social change, several sociologists have sought to use their discipline to define the goals toward which education should strive. Current thinking among sociologists, however, generally assumes that the norms of the society as a whole will set the direction of social change. In fact the goals and direction of an educational process can only be defined in the social system within which it functions. Increasingly, however, sociologists and other social scientists may assist in determining the means by which the goals of education may be achieved most efficiently. By this we simply mean that, given certain goals, the social scientists' analyses may identify the social processes by which certain goals may or may not be achieved. The analysis may indicate that some are beyond reach, and others may be achieved only with costs to the society that it is not in a position to pay. Some sociologists are currently examining the ways and means by which society may, or may not, be changed through educational efforts. Sociologists have little

interest, except as any other member of the society has, in setting the goals of education. Much sociological research and theory however, is applicable to or deals directly with the educative processes and institutions. We shall devote our discussion to these matters.

Sociology Assists Educational Practices

As the discipline has developed during the past decades, numerous principles and generalizations of sociology have been accepted to some degree in educational practice. Any examination of American schools reveals many activities which reflect basic sociological contributions to our understanding of child development, the learning or educational process, and the social setting of the school. It is impossible in this brief review to enumerate all the specific developments in education that have roots in the principles of sociology, but some of the major concepts should be mentioned.

First of all, sociologists probably more than scholars in any other discipline have demonstrated that the group is important in child development. Some years ago, we thought of personality development as essentially a matter of physiological maturation. This is still the dominant theory in much current thinking in the field. When one examines the educational literature today, however, he is impressed by the tremendous importance now attached to the child's participation in the family, the peer group, and other significant group relationships. We now recognize that learning is not solely an individual or biological matter, rather

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that the child learns to behave in a social or group milieu.

I should hasten to emphasize that there are many blank spots in our understanding of the way in which interaction in a group affects learning and personality development. Continuing contributions, which should help to validate our generalizations in this area, can be expected from sociologists and social psychologists. For example, the impact of the child's position in a group and his self-image of that position on his motivation in all types of learning has barely been explored. The child's definition of his relations with the teacher and its impact on his behavior also needs analysis. Developments in this field will greatly advance our understanding of the educational process.

A second basic principle of sociology (and other social sciences) which has contributed to our understanding of education is that human nature varies from one society to another, and from time to time in a given society. Not long ago, we operated on the assumption that human nature does not change. Although educators tried to teach certain types of behavior, they thought of this essentially as teaching the prevailing patterns of behavior a little more readily than they might otherwise have been learned. Today almost every teacher recognizes that children from differing social-cultural backgrounds vary in their interests, motivations, and the value orientations related to school learning. We recog-

nize that the intelligence tests which were presumed to measure native ability are culturally flavored so that children with varying social class, ethnic, or nationality backgrounds will perform differently on our standardized tests of achievement or intelligence. We also recognize that as societies change from rural to urban, or as people move from north to south in America, interests and motivation to learn specific types of behavior vary greatly. This principle of variation in human nature is one basis for the development of the education program which recognizes individual differences.

Perhaps the next step in our understanding of the educative process will be one that recognizes that although individuals differ in both their biological inheritance and their social-cultural conditioning, they can still learn the common socially expected patterns of behavior. People in all societies do this, for any society must maintain a core of cultural understandings. Society cannot permit every individual to be unique. Teachers have learned that children differ but they sometimes forget that society expects them to teach all youth the commonly required behavior patterns. Sociologists as well as other social scientists can assist in identifying the essential norms, values and behavior patterns. Such an achievement will provide educators with a basis for a program of individual development in the social-cultural milieu.

Another area in which the principles of sociology have provided major understandings for educators is the community. Over the decades numerous sociologists have centered their research on the analysis of community organization and the conceptualization of the community as a basic unit of social life. Recently this concept has been adapted to the needs of school organization. The community school concept, with its emphasis upon the integration of community life and the school program, has been closely related to this sociological research. Every educator recognizes the importance of the community as a foundation for his school program.

Valuable as this development has been, it has some limitations. Primary among these is the fact that much community research has been based upon rural villages, or small town community organization. Even more often our conception of the community school emerges from an image of the small homogeneous, self-contained community. The limitations of this are readily recognized when we realize that today's American youth are not likely to live in this kind of community. Rather a large proportion of these youths are going to live in large metropolitan communities and are going to move from place to place throughout the world. An educational program, therefore, based upon the small, self-sufficient community may result in extreme provincialism. What is needed today and in the future is a conception of community life and social interaction that provides the basis for metropolitan and cosmopolitan living. Sociologists are increasingly turning their attention to the analysis of the urban metropolitan community. We are slowly acquiring some understanding of how the human being lives in a heterogeneous segmentalized society. Contributions in this area will have major

significance for educators. Only as they understand the nature of the society in which their students will live can they devise an educational program that will prepare them for it.

Areas of Continuing Research

Although sociologists have already provided basic understanding of the function of the group in child development, the variation in social-cultural learnings, and the community as a basic unit of social life, we have indicated that these are areas of continuing research. Perhaps the primary contributions for years to come will continue to be in these areas. At this point, however, we should examine some more recently initiated research interests of sociologists which may contribute much to our understanding of the educative processes. Where the earlier ones have derived from the general findings of sociology, these directly involve the analysis of the educational system and process. In the last decade, numerous sociologists have turned to the school and the patterns of behavior associated with it as a field of research. There are many ways in which one might organize the research being done. We will consider three types. First, the analysis of the school as a social system; second, the analysis and evaluation of the social processes involved in education; and third, the relation of the school to the larger society.

In recent years, several sociologists have analyzed both the informal and formal aspects of the school society. A large proportion of this research has dealt with the informal clique structure and leadership patterns in the student society. These analyses have been widely used by teachers to understand the social structure of their classroom groups. The knowledge that Mary or Susie occupies a position of leadership and influence, while Jane and Deborah are essentially non-members of the classroom group has contributed much to the teacher's understanding of the child's behavior. Such understanding throws light on the academic learning as well as the personality development of children. As yet we know little about the variety of behavior that is valued in the one or several prestige and leadership systems of the school.

Other sociologists have made some analysis of the various positions in the adult structure of the school. Studies of the status of various teachers, and the status or role expectations of teachers and administrators are currently in process, and are likely to multiply. Knowledge of the ways in which teachers are expected to behave by both students and other adults, as well as their own professional self-image, is basic to an understanding of the social interaction in the school. Much research must be done before an accurate analysis of the various teaching positions and the multitude of role expectations involved in them is available. But current developments indicate the future will see major contributions in this and related areas.

Although there has been research both on the structure of the student society and the position of teachers, little is known about the relationships between the various teaching positions and the multitude of student statuses. If, as we generally assume, teacher-pupil relations are the core of the edu-

cative process in the school, a more detailed analysis of how teachers relate themselves to students, and how students relate themselves to teachers is essential. Included in this, of course, must be an analysis of the classroom communication or interaction processes. Much of the research on teaching methods in the past has dealt with a variety of techniques and characteristics of the teacher's behavior. Only in the past few years have we turned our attention to an analysis of the communication or interaction process between teacher and learner. A few preliminary analyses of the images which pupils have of their teachers and somewhat less of images the teachers hold of the pupils with whom they interact have been made, but much work is necessary before we will have an adequate understanding of the essential characteristics of teacher-pupil relations. Studies in progress suggest that extensive developments may be expected in this area of research. It will contribute much to our understanding of the student's behavior in relation to the teacher's efforts to teach the desired learning.

As we acquire an understanding of teacher-pupil relations we can better evaluate the effectiveness of various types of relationships in terms of the impact which they have on the learner. A few studies such as those on small group leadership, made in other contexts, have been applied to the classroom situation and a few have analyzed the classroom itself. But much of our evaluation of teaching is based upon *a priori* judgments. For example, because we believe democratic human relations are good in American society, we conclude that permissive democratic teacher-pupil relations are most effective in teaching desired types of behavior. Research upon which to base such conclusions is grossly inadequate. Some evidence suggests that clearly defined superordinate-subordinate types of teacher-pupil relationships are more effective in classroom learning. Much more research is necessary before we can adequately identify the most effective types of teacher-pupil relationships for achieving various kinds of information, attitudes and behavior patterns. Some such research surely can be anticipated.

A third recent development in sociology is some research on the relationship between the school and the larger society. This involves both the impact of the larger society on the school system and the possible impact of the school on other aspects of society. All recognize immediately the extensive research on the social class system and its relation to the school program. It is clear, of course, now that the social class structure is carried over into the school society. We have not yet, however, analyzed the potential effect of the school program on the class structure. For example, we have not yet analyzed what our emphasis on an educational program designed to meet individual needs does to the child's potential for mobility in the class system. Perhaps we are freezing the great majority of our students in the social class of their fathers. Much further knowledge is necessary to understand the possibilities and limitations of education for maintaining an open class system.

The analysis of community power systems and the decision-making proc-

ess as it affects the schools has recently received some attention. Most schoolmen recognize that their programs are affected by the decisions of persons who occupy positions in the community, state or national power system. Although we have considerable knowledge of the formal governmental decision-making process, we have just begun to investigate the process in the less formalized power systems which function throughout the society. Studies of the decision-making processes affecting the educational program are certain to provide important findings. Among these may be the conditions under which public opinion is mobilized to modify or overthrow the decision-making system of a community.

The current situations in many American communities provide opportunities for the analysis of the local decision-making process with regard to segregation or integration of the schools. If conditions permit, sociologists are likely to focus considerable research attention on this process in the immediate future. The results of such studies should add much to our understanding of power, authority and public opinion as they operate in the school decision-making arena.

This brief discussion has called attention to only a few of the areas in which sociology and some related aspects of social psychology have and are likely to contribute to our understanding of the educative process. Others could be mentioned, but these should indicate the range of social phenomena in education which are the objects of sociological investigation.

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The Relevancy of Educational Psychology

This article indicates two important contributions which educational psychology, as a body of information and as an arena of research activity, can make to education.

THE RELEVANCY of an applied area depends in part upon the definition of the process, institution, or event to which it is applied. The contribution that can be made by *educational* psychology is partially a function of the particular meaning invested in "education." This statement is not merely the usual innocuous preface to an extended discussion. Indeed, it is our major thesis. Too many teachers and administrators have thought of educational psychology as consisting only of an ordered catalogue of educational prescriptions, which, together with those provided by the other foundational

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