

# Anthropology and Education

**"The anthropologist is aware that his real contribution can come only as he works alongside educators, learning their problems and point of view."**

**W**HEN SOME anthropologists turned their attention to American life about a quarter century ago it was inevitable that the institutions and processes of education would eventually be studied. Much more attention has been given to the general aspects of community life and to industrial organization, however, than to education. Only recently and primarily on the initiation of educators has there begun to be a serious concern with this latter area. It is still too early to assess the quality of anthropological influence or even to predict what the future may hold. It does seem appropriate, however, to attempt an analysis of some significant areas in which educators and anthropologists might work together. This will be more meaningful if we summarize first the basic areas of study, method, and point of view.

Anthropology is traditionally defined as the study of man. Theoretically, at least, no aspect of human behavior or of the environmental conditions which have contributed to the physical or cultural development of man is denied consideration. In practice, the central concern has been with man's exploitation of his environment through technology, his adjustment to other men through social groupings, and his rela-

tionship to the supernatural. From the study of man's technical equipment, customs, activities, institutions, values and symbols the anthropologist learns the culture of a people. Cultural descriptions, however, are always within the context of a larger purpose. This is the search for generalizations which express the universalities of human behavior in time and space. In order to achieve this latter goal the anthropologist works cross-culturally and, through the comparative examination of cultures, seeks for the dynamics which explain the origin, diffusion, persistence and change of social and cultural behavior. Inevitably, the anthropologist comes to appreciate the orderliness of the cultural universe as it is expressed in pattern and system.

## Method of Anthropology

The research methods utilized by anthropologists offer another approach to problems of education. Up to the present, most educational research has been dominated by the tradition of experimental psychology. This last approach is one that creates a contrived situation, which may or may not have any relation to reality, in which results are dependent upon the manipulation of variables. Anthropological method

is quite different. The anthropologist uses the real life setting as his laboratory. It is his objective to avoid direct influence on the activities he records but rather to determine the characteristics of on-going systems as they operate within a set of conditions. Thus, he observes educative processes through the activities of persons among themselves. He can then describe the characteristic patterns and offer certain conclusions about their functions. From such knowledge it is then possible to make predictions about the probable results of a given course of action. A word of caution should be introduced at this point to counter the impression that anthropologists hold all the answers. They don't. But far more is known about the dynamics of human behavior than practitioners, in whatever field, have been able or willing to accept. The fault must also be shared by anthropologists who have failed to present their findings in usable form or who have not, until recently, shown much interest in modern educational problems.

The concern with the whole in which each cultural aspect is viewed in the context of its meaning and relation to the other parts provides an essential perspective to the understanding of the educational process. The non-judgmental, comparative method of anthropology provides an intellectual device through which the educationist can escape from the superficial irrelevancies of the moment. Fair warning should be given that the necessary reorientation of one's thinking is accomplished often with difficulty and sometimes with pain. There is no reason, however, why subject matter ex-

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pressing this point of view should not be introduced into the elementary and high school curriculum with beneficial results.

The inclusion of anthropological materials in classroom subject matter, particularly those describing the customs of primitive peoples, has made some headway in recent years. Such borrowings, however, can lead to negative results if they accentuate the ethnocentric tendency to establish the superiority of one's own way of life in contrast to the benighted peoples of other cultures. This result would contradict the very spirit of anthropological method which avoids invidious comparisons but instead accords to all peoples respect for their ways. This does not mean that one needs to approve or attempt to adopt new behavior. On the contrary, the objective should be to derive a greater awareness of the meaning of one's own culture through the examination of others.

The productive use of cross-cultural materials must be within the framework of understanding basic aspects of human life. As an example, the family is an institutional arrangement present among all peoples. Its basic functions of regulating the sexual behavior of adults, providing protection for the immature, transmitting a large share of the cultural heritage to oncoming generations, and allocating tasks to old and young, male and female, for the welfare of the corporate whole is a universal phenomenon. These are universal basic functions although the details of family activities may vary enor-

mously. Other cultural or social features provide comparable parallels. These may be seen in the division of labor between males and females; in age graded systems sometimes accompanied by rituals which mark the transition from one status to another; in the relations between concepts of space and time and the rhythm of human activities; and in the relation between culture and personality.

Many of the understandings drawn from various cultures have direct applicability to formalized educational systems. The informal or clique systems of grouping, which some educators deem unfortunate, meet basic needs which are provided for in no other way. These represent a powerful untapped social resource for advancing the goals of an educational enterprise. These groups are found in most institutional arrangements and have their parallels in simpler societies. As another example, the place and function of ritual in educational endeavor are almost completely ignored, a fact undoubtedly related to the overwhelming emphasis upon the individual in American education. Anthropology teaches us that critical periods in the life of the individual or group are eased through ceremonial observances and that values are reinforced and new learning accompanies such events. One may ask how do schools utilize, if they are even recognized, these group building devices?

### Effects of Social Change

One of the recent concerns of educators is the relation of the school system and its curriculum to the community. It is in this area that anthro-

pology joins with sociology in providing the knowledge and perspective that are needed. Educational literature has come to reflect a general awareness of the importance of sub-cultural variation expressed in ethnic and social class differences. But this is only one of several aspects of community life. Little is known about the processes of community action or the interrelations between institutions. These deficiencies should be met before other than informed opinion can direct the formulation of school policy and program. We still lack a single adequate description of the institutional process of education.

But there are other problems which fall within the interest and competence of the anthropologist which have been, as yet, only vaguely perceived. The form of the first major change in several thousand years in the pattern of human settlement has now emerged in sufficient clarity that its consequences may be examined. I refer to the regional metropolitan city with its adjunct suburbs.

Within a half century America has changed from a small town and rural centered way of life to an urban industrial one and the process is continuing its accelerated course. This change has brought in its wake modifications in the relations and values within the family and between the family and other institutional arrangements within the community.

Some of these changes have specific relevance for education. In particular, one finds evidences of new forms of religious separatism, a redefinition of sexual roles, and increased discontinuities in age group relationships. For

example, the institutionalized, dependent, non-productive, asexual ideal of the physically mature high school student provides a sharp contrast with the expected behavior of the young adult. If one considered the period of transition alone there are many problems about which little is known. But the most serious question involves the generational transmission of the cultural values. The seemingly greater emphasis upon peer group culture is evidence that directional influences from elders has diminished in magnitude if not in quality. If youth no longer derives its images of maturity from the adult world the shift represents a radical modification of the traditional educational process with possible serious consequences.

Another of the problems with which educators have struggled has been the values which education should foster. This is one of the most difficult of all and the heat engendered by controversy is testimony to the depth of feeling and divergence of view. If anthropology can offer assistance in this area then it will have made a major contribution.

But there are many difficulties which must be overcome. Anthropology is a non-judgmental and operational discipline. Its tools permit the dissection of value systems, but other than its own commitment to objectivity and the scientific method it remains aloof from value formulations. There is some evidence, however, of a break in strict adherence to this position and a recognition that some conditions contribute more to individual and group welfare than do others. Under such circumstances it is possible that anthropologists may begin to accept some responsibility in the area of value formulation.

Recent cooperative undertakings between educators and anthropologists promise well for the future. The anthropologist is aware that his real contribution can come only as he works alongside educators learning their problems and point of view. The translation of anthropological concepts and their incorporation into the educational process will be slow at best, but the results should be mutually rewarding for both groups.

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