# Peer Socialization in School
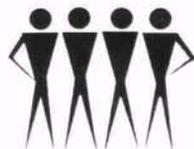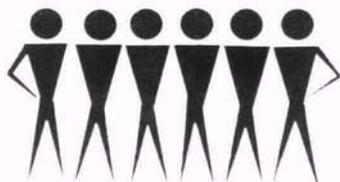
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ALTHOUGH the student group is a valuable educational resource, it remains an untapped potential in the curriculum of most primary and secondary schools. Recognition of this potential is frequently obscured by concern over the peer group's contra-influence on student achievement and conduct. Considering the influence of peer groups on the social development of youth, Bronfenbrenner concludes that it is

. . . questionable whether any society, whatever its social system, can afford largely to chance the direction of this influence, and realization of its high potential for fostering constructive development both for the child and society.[1]

The primary objective of this article is to examine structures and interaction patterns in the classroom which promote the utilization and development of student resources within the peer-group setting.[2] Unlike the stress on social adjustment and conformity in earlier writings in education, the following discussion emphasizes the development of individual talents as well as social responsibility, cooperation, and tolerance through processes of social exchange, observational learning, and social reinforcement.

The first part of the article—on socialization as a transactional process—establishes a perspective for the analysis of classroom socialization.[3] This section is followed by an examination of the learning experiences afforded by inter-age and interracial relationships. The article is primarily restricted to children in elementary school for reasons of available data and brevity.

Socialization as a Transactional Process

Socialization entails social learning which prepares the individual for membership in society and in groups within the society; it facilitates transitions from one status to another by conditioning behavior for the new requirements of specific roles and group life. Such learning is influenced

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[1] Urie Bronfenbrenner. "Responses to Pressure from Peers vs. Adults Among Soviet and American School Children." *International Journal of Psychology* 2: 206; 1967.

[2] A longer version of this paper has been written by the author: Department of Sociology, Alumni Building, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

[3] For a recent review of peer socialization in the elementary schools see: John C. Glidewell, Mildred B. Kantor, Louis M. Smith, and Lorene H. Stringer. "Socialization and Social Structure in the Classroom." In: Martin and Lois Hoffman. *Review of Research in Child Development* 2: 221-56; 1966. Russell Sage Foundation.

by the degree of coordination among socializing agents in goals and practices, and by particular training techniques and ecological contexts.

There are three *time emphases* in the socialization of children: (a) on the past—molding the young in the image of the older generation by transmitting the cultural heritage and by reinforcing traditional behavior; (b) on the present—orienting the child toward the standards of membership and role performance in his current groups, such as the family, age-group, and classroom; and (c) on the future—preparing the child for the anticipated requirements of future roles, groups, and transitions.

Socialization agencies are concerned to some extent with all three emphases, especially the contemporary demands of group membership, but schools in particular have major responsibilities in the preparatory task. In American society, the dominant time-perspective—toward the future—is most characteristic of the middle class, while an emphasis on the past and present is found in the upper and lower classes respectively.[4]

The influences to which a child is exposed include explicit training and a broad range of social conditioning which might be described as the unconscious patterning of behavior. Instruction and learning through observation are potential examples of these two types of influences.

Socialization is most commonly viewed as a one-way process which stresses the effect of the social agent on the child. Reliance on this framework has had the unfortunate effect of obscuring a basic source of socialization for authority figures—the young. Like parents, teachers partly learn their role, develop teaching skills, and acquire language patterns from the young.[5] A transactional perspective is sensitive to the way in which students socialize their teachers and each

other, as well as to the influence of teacher on students.[6] Student and teacher are defined in terms of each other and behavior is a consequence of the reciprocal influence of each person on the other in a particular situation. A satisfying social exchange in this relationship generally creates conditions favorable to similar transactions among students in the classroom. Elementary school classrooms, in which the teacher encourages student participation in problem solving and decision making, are generally distinguished by a high level of interaction and cooperation among students, minimal conflicts, tolerance for divergent opinions, and responsible initiative in school work.[7]

In a teaching relationship that is truly reciprocal, the teacher at times is also a student, and the student—especially in adolescence—is also an instructor. The teaching role of the child is especially relevant to the situation of youth in a rapidly changing society, for as Erikson observes,

. . . no longer is it merely for the old to teach the young the meaning of life, whether individual or collective. It is the young who, by their responses and actions, tell the old whether life as represented by the old and as presented to the young has meaning.[8]

Teaching becomes effective when the materials presented possess or acquire such meaning for the learner. Since teachers typically have relatively limited authority, this restricts the authority which they can reinvest in their students and contributes to the negligible control which students exercise over their education.[9] This handicap to meaningful teacher-student exchange is seen on all levels of formal education.

Up to mid-adolescence, the presence of children in school is a compulsory require-

4 See: Florence R. Kluckhohn and Fred L. Strodtbeck. *Variations in Value Orientations.* Evanston, Illinois: Row Peterson and Company, 1961. pp. 27-28.

5 On language patterns, see: Emil J. Haller. "Pupil Influence in Teacher Socialization: A Socio-Linguistic Study." *Sociology of Education* 40: 316-33; Fall 1967.

6 For a thoughtful analysis of classroom behavior from a transactional perspective, see: Ira J. Gordon. *Studying the Child in School.* New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966.

7 Glidewell *et al., op. cit.,* p. 232.

8 Erik H. Erikson. "Youth: Fidelity and Diversity." *Daedalus* 91: 24; Winter 1962.

9 James G. Anderson. "The Authority Structure of the School: System of Social Exchange." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 3: 145; Spring 1967.

ment, and thus the principles which govern social exchange in a voluntary relationship are not entirely applicable to teacher-student transactions.[10]

Nevertheless, it is apparent that social exchange with teachers is not a profitable experience for many students, and although restraints may keep their bodies in school, aggressive or passive responses to injustice and relative deprivation diminish the value of classroom experiences for other students. These consequences suggest that an equitable exchange of services, knowledge, and rewards should be an intrinsic objective in teacher-student transactions.

Teaching opportunities provide a basis for social exchange among students. The child who excels in a particular subject has the opportunity to gain competence and a sense of social responsibility by tutoring a slower student. Thus the slower student gains encouragement, understanding, and academic assistance from a person who is not socially removed by a large age difference and evaluative authority. The learning benefits achieved by students in the teaching role generally affirm the principle that teaching is a valuable developmental experience. Student tutors gain as much or even more in academic learning than the students they work with.[11] When students are used as instructors of other students, aptitude heterogeneity within the classroom may be transformed from a teaching handicap to an educational asset. Both age and ability groupings can be viewed as consequences of a teacher-centered model of instruction. Such groupings facilitate the instructional task for the adult teacher, but limit teaching-learning possibilities within the student group. Systematic incorporation of tutoring relationships in the curriculum may help to reduce student indifference associated with the passive role of the learner.

[10] On social behavior as exchange, see: George C. Homans. *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961.

[11] Robert D. Cloward. "Studies in Tutoring." *Journal of Experimental Education* 36: 14-25; Fall 1967; and Glen H. Elder, Jr. "Age Integration and Socialization in an Educational Setting." *Harvard Educational Review* 37: 594-619; Fall 1967.

Socialization in the Classroom

Socialization is a continuing process for the individual. Thus an understanding of peer influences and learning at one point in time requires an examination of the student's past, especially of his reinforcement history in family and classroom experiences.

One of the first tasks the child faces as he enters a new classroom in elementary school is to gain an understanding of his role, of where he stands in relation to classmates and the teacher. This cognitive map or perspective is associated with the child's developing status as defined by his peers.

In the first few days or weeks of class, students tend to sort themselves out on three status dimensions: (a) liking or social acceptance, (b) the ability to influence other students, and (c) competence in schoolwork.[12] One should note here the resemblance between these status dimensions among children in the classroom and those in the larger society, such as prestige, power, and wealth or accomplishment. Accuracy of the student's perception of his classroom status is generally greater among children of high versus low status (defense mechanisms are a factor here) and in classrooms with a clear status hierarchy. This determinant of status perception is likewise operative in the larger community.

In the elementary school, a child's status on these dimensions remains moderately stable from one grade to another. Although a causal sequence among these status factors cannot be confidently determined, the success of a child in working out friendships or accepting relationships with other students appears to have a very significant effect on his perceived ability to influence his classmates and to achieve.

The peer system in most elementary school classrooms includes several subgroups, some dyads, and a few isolates. While there is little need to recite the widely recognized consequences of social rejection, studies of peer-group socialization have found that these effects vary in relation to the status

[12] This paragraph and the next are indebted to a review of research by Glidewell *et al.*, *op. cit.*

structure of the classroom. Possession of low status in the eyes of classmates is most strongly correlated with negative attitudes toward school, low self-esteem, and under-utilization of mental ability when this status is correctly perceived by the student.[13] As noted earlier, clarity of the status structure increases the accuracy of this perception. More detailed information on the determinants and content of social exchange in elementary school classrooms is needed.

Conditions which foster beneficial exchange and learning among students are also those which lessen prejudice: equal status in the situation, pursuit of common goals, cooperative interdependence, and support from the main authorities, structures, and norms.[14] As individuals interact with one another under favorable conditions, they are likely to acquire common perspectives and more positive feelings toward each other.

While status equality and similarity in values, background, or skin color are significant bases of interpersonal attraction, there are tasks within the classroom which bring together children who would not ordinarily choose each other—such as the bright and dull, or older and younger students. The tutoring relationship is a good example. Rewards for tutor and learner are contingent on cooperative rather than competitive interdependence. Relatively equal rewards for progress on the teaching-learning task serve to reinforce cooperative behavior.

School Composition, Student Relationships, Learning

Social stratification and segregation in a complex society limit a child's knowledge and understanding of himself and of others from different life situations. In schools, the composition of the student body on sex, race, and family status specifies a particular type of learning environment, as do age-grades and ability groups. If the social composition of the classroom resembles that of the larger community and society, children have the opportunity to acquire an understanding and appreciation of social and cultural variation through observation, exchange, and instruction. Instead of reinforcing uniformity in the children of diverse groups in society, schools could utilize this diversity for broadening the knowledge and understanding of the students. Age-heterogeneous and inter-racial relationships are two examples of such diversity. The educational and social relevance of these experiences are suggested by the results of several recent studies.

Cross-Age Relations

At the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, a series of exploratory investigations have been conducted on relationships between children of different ages in two elementary schools and in a summer camp for children from 4 to 14 years of age.[15] The main objectives of the project are to develop and implement a constructive program of cross-age interaction, and to assess the impact of inter-age perceptions and attitudes on both younger and older children.

The inter-age program among elementary school children included the following elements. Children in the sixth grades were assigned as academic assistants in the first four grades, where they helped the children with their course work. The effectiveness of the older students and the response of the younger children were contingent on the following training procedures.

The teachers were first oriented to the potential of cross-age interaction among students and teachers. The use of academic assistants was described as requiring the teacher to "lend the resources" of his children. At several points during the school day, older children were given special train-

[13] Richard G. Schmuck. "Some Relationships of Peer Liking Patterns in the Classroom to Pupil Attitudes and Achievement." *School Review* 71: 337-59; 1963.

[14] Gordon W. Allport. *The Nature of Prejudice*. New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1958. p. 267.

[15] Peggy Lippitt and John E. Lohman. "Cross-Age Relationships: An Educational Resource." *Children* 12: 113-17; 1965; Jeffery W. Eiseman and Peggy Lippitt. "Olders-Youngers Project Evaluation." Report prepared for the Stern Family Fund and the Detroit Board of Education, 1966; and Ronald Lippitt et al., "Implementation of Positive Cross-Age Relationships." Chapter 5 in unpublished manuscript, 1966.

ing in relating to younger children, and in teaching content material. In order to counter peer-group norms which did not reward interaction with younger children, the investigators asked a small group of seventh graders, who had high status among their peers and were experienced in working as helpers, to talk to the sixth graders about the benefits of the helping relationship.

The importance of these training procedures was reinforced many times in initial sessions with the older helpers. When asked, "What sorts of things have you observed at school or at home between youngers and olders?" the children reported few constructive encounters. It was commonly that "some bigger kids" were taking something away from, bossing, or shoving "little kids." One potential source of this dominance pattern is the process by which children learn age-norms in the family. The behavior of younger children is frequently derogated when adults attempt to reinforce age-appropriate behavior in their offspring.[16] "Don't act like your little brother" is a mild example of this practice.

The results of this experiment in cross-age interaction show that younger boys and girls perceive older children positively when the latter include them in activities, display friendliness, or offer help and recognition. The younger children tended to learn how to cope with adults and older children; became aware of the abilities, freedoms, and limitations of older children; developed conceptions of the meaning of different levels of "grown-upness"; and gained an opportunity for greater reciprocity and autonomy than is possible in relations with an adult teacher.

The ability of the older children to communicate with younger children, coupled with their other services, greatly enriched the educational experience of both groups. Most of the older students were enthusiastic about the program, especially the low-achiev-ers from low-status families, whose desire to learn and relation to authority figures in the school generally improved. The older children were given a chance to assume responsibility; to test and evaluate their knowledge, teaching, and social skills; and to work through personal problems encountered with age-mates and siblings.[17] In a number of cases, attitudes and skills acquired in the cross-age experience were transferred to relationships in the family.

Similar opportunities for cross-age interaction and exchange are available in nongraded elementary schools, but competent research on these processes is sadly lacking.[18] One searches in vain among countless reports on the nongraded school for any sophisticated examination of cross-age interaction, or even for any recognition of its educational potential. Reliable evidence on the academic effects is also lacking. In view of the social learning potential of age-heterogeneous groups, the need for well-designed research on cross-age interaction in this setting is compelling.

Interracial Friendships and Learning

The accumulation of research findings on interracial contact provides a preliminary appraisal of the social and academic effects of desegregated schools and classrooms. In the nationwide Coleman study,[19] academic performance and a sense of mastery among Negro students were related to the proportion of white students in their schools. Much of this effect is a consequence of the higher social class background and scholastic ambitions of the white students. More recently,

[16] For a more detailed discussion of this point, see: Glen H. Elder, Jr. "Age Groups, Status Transitions, and Socialization." Prepared for the Task Force on Environmental Aspects of Psycho-Social Deprivation, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, June 19, 1968.

[17] The results of this research are similar in many respects to the findings of a study of cross-age interaction in an adult-adolescent school. See: Glen H. Elder, Jr. "Age Integration and Socialization in an Educational Setting," op. cit.

[18] John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson. The Non-Graded Elementary School. Revised Edition. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963; and Frank R. Dufay. Ungrading the Elementary School. New York: Parker Publishing Company, 1966.

[19] James S. Coleman et al. Equality of Educational Opportunity. Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966.

studies supported by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights show that close friendships with white students have a positive effect on the academic performance and attitudes of Negro students over and above the influence of student social class.[20]

Although observational research is needed to fill in the intervening processes through which interracial friendships have their effect, a clue to such processes is suggested by available data on classroom social structure; emotional acceptance is related to leadership status, self-esteem, and the utilization of abilities. Among Negro students in the study, possession of close white friends was correlated with their involvement in extracurricular activities and a preference for desegregated schools regardless of the racial composition of the classroom.

On the other hand, interracial tension—which was inversely related to the length of time students were enrolled in a desegregated school—had a negative effect on the attitudes and performance of Negro students. Desegregated schooling in childhood has also been found to be related to positive interracial attitudes among Negro adults.

The interracial consequences of desegregated schooling and close Negro friends were similar among white students. White students with close Negro friends were less likely than other white students to prefer an all-white school, regardless of the proportion of Negro students in their classroom. Length of time in a desegregated school—a crude index of exposure to the socializing influence of a biracial setting—was related both to having Negro friends and to a preference for desegregated schooling.

These limited findings are a mere step toward an understanding of interracial contact and learning in the schools. Classroom observations and laboratory research,[21] in particular, are needed to supplement the findings of survey research.

The educational resources present among students in a classroom may either be utilized within the curriculum or ignored. The challenging task for teachers with biracial or age-heterogeneous classrooms is to use these resources creatively in furthering the social and academic learning of their students.

What task in the classroom can effectively bring children differing in age, race, and aptitude together for exchanging services, ideas, and experiences in a mutually rewarding relationship? Equally important, what conditions sustain an equitable social exchange between teacher and students? ☐

[20] U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. *Racial Isolation in the Public Schools.* Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967, Volume 2. Findings reported in the following paragraphs were drawn from this volume.

[21] An example of the kind of experimental work needed is described in: Irwin Katz. "The Socialization of Academic Motivation in Minority Group Children." In: *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation* 15: 133-91; 1967. David Levine, editor. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.