

Research into the stimulation of social development in school with particular reference to pupils aged 4-12*

1. *The theme*

This workshop was one of four meetings held in 1976 under the auspices of the Council of Europe to enable educational researchers to share their expertise and thus improve the effectiveness of their enquiries.

The particular topic chosen for Nijmegen was the stimulation through education of the social development of pupils aged 4-12: an area of fundamental importance for a child's personal development, yet one which has received relatively little explicit attention in the actual day-to-day life of schools and virtually none as a subject for empirical research as distinct from armchair philosophising. With a few exceptions it is only recently that investigations have been undertaken into how social growth might be encouraged within a school and how appropriate methods might be devised and evaluated.

This paper is an attempt to summarise the proceedings at Nijmegen in a non-technical way without acknowledging the researches and reports from which the various points and quotations have been taken. A more detailed account together with the workshop documents edited by the Chairman, Dr. C. F. M. van Lieshout, of the Psychological Laboratory in the University of Nijmegen, has shortly been published by Swets Publishing Company of Lisse in the Netherlands.

2. *What is social development?*

In this particular area of psychology as in so many others, considerable confusion is caused by giving technical connotations to words that are in everyday use.

Traditionally the human mind has been considered as having three aspects: those that are cognitive or intellectual, those that are emotional and have to do with feeling, and those which are social and refer to personal relationships and to human behaviour. But this distinction is not only artificial, it is also misleading: the three aspects are inseparable parts of an individual's personality. In a child's development towards adulthood they are mutually dependent: his social behaviour depends always on how he

perceives and understands the world around him, and the adequacy of his reasoning must be judged by the extent to which he understands the world in which he lives and the ways in which he reacts to it.

One might therefore say that social development is the growth of human competence in so far as it involves the development of emotions, values and a concern for life with other people.

Such a definition may be considered neutral and descriptive or normative and prescriptive. Neutral in the sense that the ways in which a certain individual sees and reacts to his social environment may be undesirable from society's point of view, and yet for him still be a very effective response in terms of his particular personality and his specific social situation. Thus, for some writers it would be possible to speak of good social development even about a nine-year old thief who lives in a criminal subculture. The study of social development when it is given this meaning is value-free in the same way as the study of physical development in different countries which have varying climatic and geographical and cultural conditions is neutral.

But for many people social development is not neutral but is normative, prescriptive and concerned with values. For them, it is the growth of intended and specified qualities that represent the norms, standards and the social structure of their particular society. A difficulty here from a school's point of view is of course that what is desirable in one society, or even in one social class, may be less desirable in another. Independence and the ability to stand on one's own feet are traits that are highly regarded in some societies whilst co-operation and group solidarity are respected more in certain others. In some special classes learning the proper accent, good manners, discipline, a sense of responsibility and powers of leadership are said to

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be the principal aims of education whereas in others it is the fostering of a competitive spirit.

Is it part of a school's responsibility to give children social values and if so what should these values be?

During the last ten years one common criticism of schools has been that they lack relevance for many pupils because their emphasis is upon academic skills whilst for most pupils their needs are social. And along with this view is the assertion that schools should deliberately inculcate desirable social skills and values: that school should be a place where society recreates itself in the young. But others believe that it is no part of a teacher's duty to instil certain social standards in his pupils and that in any discussion of values and attitudes he should encourage the children to form their own views whilst remaining neutral himself. This view is frequently expressed by teachers of social studies (history, geography, current affairs, etc.). It is an opinion which has led to considerable criticism of schools by parents.

3. *The objectives of social education*

If one accepts that schools should stimulate pupils' social development and that their success or failure in this area of the curriculum should be evaluated as in any other, the developmental process must be studied and certain directions regarded as more desirable than others.

However, there is little consensus on social goals; but just because goals are not explicitly stated this does not mean that they do not exist. They may be implicitly imbedded in the social structure of the school and teachers who publicly reject any responsibility for determining the social development of their pupils may in fact greatly influence them by their teaching methods, their own attitudes and their general behaviour. These directions may be contrary to the values of the local community.

4. *Teaching social behaviour*

Group living is based on self discipline and an objective of social education is to develop such control in children and to teach them ways of dealing constructively with inter-personal difficulties. This means not only their inhibiting aggressive altruistic and considerate. This of course demands both the ability to see events from the standpoint of others and to understand their feelings.

To develop these skills, the teacher will encourage pupils to suggest reasons why people behaved the way they do and how they might deal with particular situations. One group of children for example became noticeably less aggressive to a pupil who spoilt their games when they realised that he misbehaved when he came tired.

Role-playing techniques may be adopted. In one study a list of situations that made him angry was drawn up for each child. The pupil was then allowed to act out these situations and practice dealing with them non-aggressively. He progressed from situations that caused him least frustration to the more difficult as his tolerance

developed.

Children can be helped to see that aggression is normal behaviour that can be understood, controlled and expressed in a socially acceptable manner as for example in some types of game. One programme used for this purpose consists of six one-hour discussions stimulated by films, photographs and slides. Stories by the children about their own feelings and behaviour and those of their friends are also used and various explanations discussed. It is reported that such techniques are remarkably effective in lessening aggressive behaviour.

5. *Moral education*

For many parents and teachers social education is seen as moral education – teaching the difference between right and wrong. In current research into moral education, however, the tendency is to avoid being dogmatic over values and to concentrate rather on how children learn their standards and then to produce curriculum materials and devise teaching approaches based on this understanding. The objection is to any suggestion of indoctrination or crude social engineering.

One moral education project described in the workshop showed the type of compromise that may be made between the neutral and the prescriptive viewpoint. The researchers adopted a working description of moral behaviour that can provide a direction if not a destination: that one should take into consideration other people's needs, feelings and interests as well as one's own.

To increase children's awareness of the moods, feelings and intentions of other people the curriculum designers produced sets of photographs and posters which showed the faces and body gestures of a number of people in different moods. They also devised mood labels and work cards. In a related attempt to lead children to consider the consequences of their actions upon others and to encourage sensitivity, the researchers used stories which raised social/moral problems in a systematic way. These were then used as a basis for discussion and for drama work.

6. *Findings*

Such clinical and educational studies show clearly that in the most important area of human life – how to lead people to co-operate with others – we have barely approached the frontier of knowledge.

There are only very few points which can be made with certainty. Among these are:

- a. Behaviour is both caught and taught. It is learned through imitation and from deliberate teaching. Children do both what adults tell them and what they see adults do.
- b. The laws of learning – frequency, intensity and effect – discovered from experiments into cognitive learning apply equally to social learning.
- c. Children grow like the people they live with. Social

learning can only take place within a context of relationships and interaction; children learn their behaviour from the treatment they receive and it is possible to identify adults who are particularly influential in this process. They are those who are especially important to the child for his physical survival – those who feed and clothe him, and care for him when he is ill; those whom he sees often; those for whom he has affection and those who are consistent – children are incapable of appreciating the stresses which force adults into reacting differently to the same situation at different times.

- d. The pressure to conform to the standards of his friends rather than to those of this family increases in strength as the child grows older.

7. Conclusion

Advances in social education will depend upon the

drawing together of findings from all the disciplines concerned with human development. Equally importantly they will depend upon teachers working closely with parents, psychologists, educational administrators and the various national social services.

Children only go to school during 12% of their life span and in those years they are there for only about 12% of their time. Social education is therefore primarily the responsibility of the parents. Schools can only help a little.

To enable educational administrators and others from various countries to discuss what this 'little' might be, and how some of the various issues raised in this paper might be implemented at a practical level, a discussion arranged by the Council of Europe might be helpful.

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