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A CULTURAL APPROACH TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE CURRICULUM

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The purpose of this paper is to outline a conceptual framework which relates the sociology of the classroom to the sociology of the content of the curriculum, and to analyse within this framework the problem of general and specialist education. The tenor of the discussion will be somewhat speculative and the analysis will be broad rather than detailed.

Such an approach can only be justified when breaking new ground. I am encouraged to think it a useful one by a judgement of Floud and Halsey: 'It is regrettable that this whole question of the fate of the content of education should have been relatively so neglected by sociologists. Many questions suggest themselves, to which no answers can as yet be attempted'.[1] If this assessment of the situation be just, there is perhaps some place even for tentative approaches through sociology to problems of curriculum content.

Our point of departure here will be a functional definition of culture. Culture is the medium through which human minds interact in communication. The concept may be compared broadly with that of light in physics. Hoffmann writes: 'Realising that there must be something bridging the distances between our eyes, the things we see, and the lamps illuminating them, [the Greeks] gave it objective reality and set about studying it and inventing theories about it. When the modern scientist talks about light he has in mind just this something'.[2] We assert that there must be a medium bridging the subjective

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[1] A. H. Halsey, Jean Floud and C. Arnold Anderson (editors), *Education, Economy and Society*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1961, p. 10.

[2] Banesh Hoffmann, *The Strange Story of the Quantum*, London: Pelican edition, 1963 (1947), p. 14.

experiences of minds which communicate with one another a
identify this as culture. In doing so, we have not suggested
culture is, but merely suggested its function or location in
interaction.

It is important to notice that this approach detaches culture
numerable groups, as in the phrase, 'the culture of the Bantu
attaches it instead to interaction situations. Our present concept
related to social structure, but its immediate location by definitio
the social process.

If we carry our dubious but helpful analogy with light a
further, we may say that, although we have an immediate pl
perception of light, as when we observe light rays, yet the phy
analysis of light takes us into a conceptual world beyond this
diate one of physical impression, and quite different from
speaks, for instance, of waves and particles which are not v
The immediate perceptual representation of culture as a medi
communicative interaction is to be found in language, and in
symbol systems such as mathematical symbols, chemical symb
pictures. Music may also be regarded as a highly abstracted sy
system. All these 'languages' are anchored in culture.

The effective use of language implies a degree of consensus a
those who communicate. Culture is precisely this consensus
relation between language and culture is reciprocal. Langu
developed on the basis of culture, but again language dete
culture. To an extent we find a name for what we see: to an ext
see what we have a name for.

This is not the place for an extended analysis of culture. M
the analyses which have been offered are consonant with the def
of culture adopted here. Quite a crude one will serve out p
purposes.

Let us say, then, that culture consists of values, understandin
meanings.

Values represent consensus in evaluation, in judgements of g
bad, better or worse. They are socially approved ends in the br
sense. To say this is, of course, not a statement about the justif
of values, but about the dynamics of values. Values are po
consensus created and reinforced in social interaction. Ch
values, for example, are created and reinforced in the social inte

of the Church. The problem of the justification of values is not for sociology, but for theology or ethics.

Understandings are understandings between minds. The concept is adopted as a blanket term to cover a range of consensus susceptible to complex analysis, which we shall not attempt here. Information, techniques and interpretations of situations, when shared, are understandings. They are the non-evaluative elements in culture, or rather they are elements not evaluated as ends.

In short, values represent motivational consensus, understandings, perceptual or informational consensus or consensus regarding resources. Values may be regarded as understandings energized by motivation.

Meanings are simply complexes of values and understandings articulated on symbols. They are the echoes which the symbol evokes in the common experience of two or more people. The definition of a word together with all its associative and emotional overtones constitutes a meaning. Most words have complex meanings which are differentiated within the language group. Examples are 'church', 'family', 'fabulous'. Within the group of English speakers, these words have many different meanings. 'Fabulous', for example, may evoke Aesop or Cecil B. de Mille, the fables of the ancient world or of modern Hollywood.

Groups which can interact without misunderstanding do so on the basis of a consensus of meanings manifested in linguistic usage and dependent upon a deeper consensus of values and understandings.

Such a description of the content of culture will suffice in this context. Two other characteristics of culture must, however, be noticed. Culture is learnt and shared.

The assertion that culture is learnt implies that it is a function of individual minds, when the mind is regarded as the locus of subjective experience. The use of the term *culture* to denote objects such as houses, institutions such as churches, behaviour such as gambling, or symbolic objects such as paintings or books, is incompatible with the definition we have adopted. However, culture in the present sense does denote the consensus of values, understandings and meanings which underlie these objects and institutions.

The assertion that culture is shared implies that it is also a function of groups. Theoretically the minimum group is two, but the size

criterion of the group is dependent upon the scale of our study. The essential point is that most of what we learn is not unique to ourselves but shared with others. The process of learning therefore serves to associate us with one group and dissociate us from others. To under take the learning involved in taking a medical degree associates u with the group, doctors, and dissociates us from groups such a teachers, dustmen and gamekeepers. This implication of the idea tha culture is shared lies behind those effects of education which are generally described by sociologists as 'differentiation'.

In the context of this view of culture we face the traditional assertior of sociologists that education is concerned with the transmission o culture. If this be true, then on our account, the teacher's task is to transmit values, understandings and meanings articulated upon symbol systems. In doing so, he provides a medium of communicative interaction.

In the normal teaching situation the teacher teaches a group, th class. If he teaches them subtraction by decomposition or laboratory procedure or *Hamlet* or Ibsen, he gives them something in common a a group. As he does so, he cuts them off from other groups and asso ciates them with yet other groups whose classroom experience is clos to their own.

Since culture is normally sustained by groups, the question arise whether there is a dynamic principle at work in the group which i being taught. The findings of social psychology suggest that there is and we can turn to the social psychologist to find the conceptua framework we need to analyse this group dynamic.

Groups achieve communicative interaction through that consensu we have called culture. Communicative interaction is a basic require ment of satisfactory group life, and therefore the group naturall seeks to maintain its culture. The whole system of interaction depend upon the general prediction of the lines of consensus within the group All members of the group will expect other members to converge ir these areas of consensus, which represent the cultural basis of the group

This culture behind communication and action is not explicit and externalized. Accordingly, it must be inferred from behaviour; and consequently the group can only control and sustain its culture b reacting to the behaviour of individual members. These individual

act within the group and the group reacts, exerting pressures on the individual in an effort to shape his behaviour.

The general picture which emerges from this view of group dynamics is as follows. Culture is represented in a group by a climate of expectation. All action takes place within this climate. The breach of expectation which threatens the culture of the group evokes a hostile group reaction, conformity evokes a general approval, a breach of expectation which is seen as a development consonant with the culture and enriching it evokes emphatic approval.

We have drawn attention to the pressure towards consensus in groups. The socially mediated rewards and punishments which constitute the potency of such pressures are generally called sanctions. Sanctions are quite simply rewards and punishments which are deployed by groups rather than by individuals.

The essential dynamic principle behind culture in groups is, therefore, as follows. In any group in sustained communicative interaction pressures are exerted through the deployment of sanctions. Culture depends upon these pressures, which serve to sustain it.

Thus, to say that a teacher transmits culture in the classroom is to say not only that values, understandings and meanings are learnt and shared, but that they are adequately reinforced by group pressures. Any classroom group will generate pressures and these pressures must be organized in such a way as to support the culture which the teacher is concerned for.

Since this group process in the classroom is powerful, it is potentially the teacher's greatest enemy or his greatest ally. His job is to see that it is his ally. In detail this is perhaps more a matter of generating, feeding and criticizing the culture of the classroom than one of mere transmission.

A number of practical examples may illustrate our interpretation. A simple consensus is that which concerns classroom behaviour. Let us say that the teacher will from time to time wish to talk to the class as a whole. All must then listen quietly. If the culture of the class is against him, talking will recur and the pressures in the class will support it rather than tend to eradicate it. If the teacher succeeds in inducing the group to accept fully the kind of behaviour he wants, then his principal task is accomplished. Inevitably, as in any group, there will be those who fall out of line, either because of lack of self-

control or because of that studied defiance of the group which may perhaps be called 'norm blasphemy'. But now the group and the teacher will exert parallel pressures. The class themselves will try to silence the talker. In such a case the teacher commonly says that he has succeeded in carrying the class along with him.

Social pressures may be observed continually in classroom groups. Children express horror at one boy's untidy exercise, believe that poetry is for sissies, agree in the error that the Roman occupation of Britain dates from 55 B.C. The teacher's job is to generate in the group a normed, that is a self-sustaining, culture, which he is prepared to endorse and defend.

Little empirical study of this process in the classroom has been undertaken, but a persuasive analogy can be found in industrial psychology where norms of productivity and quality have been studied. By its nature, the 'work culture' of a factory group is rather 'thin', but the principle remains the same.

A further concept must be set into our analysis if we are to relate our somewhat abstract theory to everyday educational observation. The pressures within a group are exerted, not randomly, but according to a systematic pattern. Social pressures applied to behaviour imply a judgement of that behaviour and judgement implies criteria. These criteria on which pressures are organized we shall call standards. We may now summarize our theoretical account of classroom process, and then translate it into the everyday language of education.

The job of the teacher, we have claimed, is to generate in his class a culture based on standards he approves. That culture forms the medium of the group life of the class. We may add that the quality of the group life depends on the quality of the medium of interaction. A rich culture is one which sustains a rich group life.

In common parlance, the job of the teacher is to get the class working self-critically as a group. True educational standards are those which develop and articulate the pupils' capacity for self-criticism. Such standards of self-criticism can only be securely maintained by most individuals through their association with a like-minded group.

So far we have spoken of culture as if it were a mere flat consensus in which any creative innovation would be impossible. This is far from the truth. Creative innovation is only possible through culture.

The reason for this is as follows. The consensus which underlies culture crystallizes into meanings represented by symbols. These symbols, which are learnt by individuals in communication, serve to objectify culture in manipulable form. The language which is learnt culturally in communication can be taken into solitary reflction where the symbols can be re-ordered and can interact so that it is possible to establish new relationships and new concepts. The public language of religion, for example, can be taken into private thinking and used to create a unique subjective experience of the idea of God. Thus individuality grows from culture. Men forge in the dialectic of social interaction the tools which serve the inner dialectic of thought and imagination. And perhaps the most vital criterion of the richness of a culture is the degree to which it feeds individuality and creative innovation.

If this principle is true of the small group, it is true also of public culture. The arts, humanities and sciences are modes of creative innovation which feed on culture. The arts and humanities through their symbol systems offer creative outlets, through which men can develop their resources in handling and enriching the quality of their own subjective experience. The symbol systems of the sciences and their methodology are adapted to the creative extension of man's understanding of and control of his objective environment. The social sciences seek to bridge the gap between the humanities and the physical sciences, attempting on the one hand to study man as object, and on the other to get a purchase on the study of subjective experience. The critical apparatus which is built into the methodology of science and the critical climate which surrounds the arts and the humanities represent the cultural assessment of innovation. All scientific and artistic innovations offer to change the public culture. The critical framework of scientific method filters the innovations of scientists. In the arts and humanities, the role of the critic is to represent the tradition against the innovating individual. In both cases the result is a dialectic interchange between innovator and critic which serves to assess, assimilate and discipline cultural innovations.

We now see a clear line of argument on which we can justify the inclusion of both the arts and the sciences in the curriculum, irrespective of their immediate vocational relevance. The culture of the class, which the teacher supervises, is a sub-culture through which young

people enter the cultures of the adult and public worlds. We
teacher to teach not subjects but, as it were, himself, he would
were successful, merely trap the pupils in his own culture. Accord
he has to base the experience of the classroom on some ob
curriculum material. Because the arts and sciences are pri
modes of innovation, they offer two marked advantages as curric
First, they present cultural elements as if they were innovation
to the individual pupil who is learning they are just that.
Plato's *Republic* is a good basis for education precisely beca
presents perennial ideas as if they were new, just what is requi
the teaching situation, where that which is familiar in the c
must be discovered anew by the individual. The second stren
these traditional elements in the curriculum is that they introdu
pupil not only to a content of ideas, but also to the arts and sc
as modes of innovation which he can in his turn learn to use crea
In these subjects the creative and conservative functions of edu
are most intimately fused.

We are, of course, not concerned to argue that other subje
not useful, but merely to justify the wisdom behind the tradi
focus of the school curriculum.

In the light of the foregoing analysis of the teaching proce
its content, we can perhaps make an approach to the probl
general and specialist education.

We may say that the core of the teaching process lies in the te
judgement of the standards adopted by the pupils. According
own standards, the teacher deploys his rewards and punishr
encouragement and discouragement in order to influence the
dards of the group. These group standards form the basis of the
pressures which in turn influence the individual standards of the
members. The question of the sources of the teacher's star
arises, and we shall expect to find these standards accepted
groups from which the teacher draws his cultural support.

Let us take a simple example. In the nineteenth century, it
be argued, the elementary school was largely concerned with edu
for clerical and similar occupations. The most powerful critic
elementary school teacher was the employer. For the teacher
ployers tended to become a reference group for standards.
calculation, neat handwriting and so forth were at a premium

r might even say to the pupil: 'What do you think your employer
y to work like that?'

adays, the primary school hands the children on to the secon-
:hool and often to higher education. For primary teachers, the
ce group for standards tends to become secondary teachers and
nics. Now, the primary teacher tends to ask whether her ap-
. to the teaching of number is a good basis for later mathematics
g. Primary education thus becomes a kind of general educa-
groundwork, leading to secondary and higher education which
o become specialized. The specialized standards of the secon-
:hool are underwritten by reference to specialized vocational
ademic groups. Thus standards in science derive from academic
search scientists, in literature from university teachers or the
approved professional critics, in mathematics from professional
maticians. At a more specialized level still, professional stan-
are formed and developed in specialized professional groups,
s the medical profession and the legal profession.

in the secondary school and the university that the problem of
lance between specialization and general education has been
cutely felt. We shall focus our attention on the secondary school
:cept as our point of departure the treatment of the situation in
owther Report, the most recent English government report on
ary education.

Crowther Committee felt that specialization in academic and
:al forms of education was necessary if high academic, vocational
rofessional standards were to be obtained, but expressed reserve
the effects of this on the general educational impact of pupils'
s. Their solution was to advocate minority time in which there
be an attempt to counterbalance specialist work by contrasting
mplementary studies. We should attempt to make every aca-
or technologist both literate and numerate, or in a phrase which
ecome popular in Britain we should try to marry 'the two
es' of science and the arts. It is fair to say that the idea of
l education implied here is that of balance. The aspiration is to
:e all-rounders.

s prescription is offered only to the intellectual *élite*. The general
ion of the majority of the population in the non-academic
lary schools is not seen as a balance of academic subjects but as a

building out of basic literacy and numeracy and the attempt to instil or develop moral standards, good citizenship and a sensible practicality in everyday affairs. Little stress is laid on these qualities in the discussion of academic and technical education.

Here, then, are two standards in general education, and there is yet a third which lies implicit behind most British thinking about education. If the parents can afford to send the child to a public school, he will receive a good general education, whether he has marked academic ability or not.

Behind these notions of general education, there are two distinct ideas. On the one hand, 'general' is taken to mean broad, and is opposed to narrow specialist education. On the other, 'general' implies an education for the general experience of social intercourse and of the human lot.

We may now apply our conceptual framework to the problem outlined.

The prime function of academic education is to transmit specialist cultures which support creative and original work in particular fields. Groups such as chemists, archaeologists, geographers and lawyers adopt professional standards as a basis for action. Through its education each group comes to share a culture of its own, and it is on the groundwork of this common culture that professional activities are carried on. Thus, academic education as it advances, becomes more and more specialized, acting as a means of cultural differentiation in societies where the complication of human knowledge has made it necessary to narrow one's field of attention in the interests of efficiency. Moreover, by distributing knowledge in this way to its beneficiaries academic education secures for them the place in the division of labour for which it prepares them. It not only prepares them to be doctors, but entitles them to be doctors, and most professions based on academic training have a relatively high status in our society.

In addition to this specialist and differentiating tendency, academic education has been held to provide a kind of general education. Here, the argument is that academic disciplines pursued far enough provide a world view. Through them, very wide ranges of experience can be organised by the individual. Thus, an historian, when he reaches a certain level of study, begins to be able to focus human experience historically, a scientist achieves 'a scientist's view of human life and the

rse'. The discipline provides a point of view from which experi-
an be ordered and given meaning. This general effect is achieved,
ver, only if the study is pursued to a very high level. It is essen-
for the few, perhaps even for a small *élite* among the academic
sions themselves.

may be that at the very highest levels of study men can go out
their own specialist subject to meet others in other fields. Per-
Einstein and Toynbee and Bertrand Russell could speak con-
vely together, though each from his own point of view. In
al, however, the increase in specialization has tended to lead to
culty of communication between the students of different aca-
disciplines, and it is basically the desire to maintain the unity
academic world which lies behind the demand for breadth of

the very few who can ascend through knowledge to wisdom,
hom Plato would have chosen to rule his ideal state, an academic
ine provides a general education in the sense of a coherent and
attitude towards life. For those who cannot aspire so high, a
ening of subjects may at least allow them to communicate with
academics about common problems.

scarcely accounts for the fact that an academic education is
d to help people to handle the problems of common human
ence and the social and moral issues of everyday life. Yet I
e this reputation is not entirely false. The fact is that the social
to which an academic education gives entry hold understand-
nd values of far wider significance than those which support
ional competence. They have their own manners and morals,
wn political and social attitudes. If what we ask of a general
ion is moral and social standards and ways of coping with life,
ese groups can be accepted as sources of such standards — but
those of like social situation. The position appears to be that
nic schools endorse the cultural standards of those social groups
their successful pupils will enter. In a sense, general education is
matter of curriculum, which is specialist, but of underlying
tions, and these assumptions do not have to be driven home
rcibly, because the social pressures to which the pupil will be
ed when he finishes his formal education will reinforce the
tions of the school. In Britain, students often escape punishment

for breaches of the law which would certainly be punished in apprentices. I suspect that this is because there is a recognition that, once they have become doctors or teachers or priests, social pressures will ensure that they offend no more.

Thus it is in a sense the selective function of academic education which produces its general effects. The general education of the academic school prepares the pupil for the social destination to which it assigns him.

Let us now consider the high reputation of the English public schools as providers of a general education. Again, it seems that the source of their most general effects is not the curriculum, which is usually much the same as that of the academic grammar school. Indeed, the ethos of the schools themselves emphasizes something other than curriculum content. Most public schools are boarding institutions and they feel that their community life with its emphasis on personal discipline, leadership and so forth is the firmest basis of their influence. In fact, they instil into their pupils in somewhat idealized form the standards normed in the English upper classes and upper middle classes. Because of class influences in the structure of English society most public schoolboys will emerge with a certain status in society and will associate with groups of similar status. In other words, the public school prepares pupils to take their places in the social group which is their destination. Its success is largely due to the fact that adult life confirms the relevance of its teaching.

Teachers in public schools and teachers in academic grammar schools can both find reference groups in society at large to underwrite and confirm the standards they seek to persuade their classes to accept; and they can also feel that when a pupil leaves the school through which he has been inducted into adult culture, he will most often join adult groups which will afford at least general support for the standards he has accepted in school.

In both types of school the curriculum will tend to be academic. At first it will contain a large number of subjects, but these will be taught less for a relevance to life than for a relevance to higher studies. Such a curriculum allows a pupil to choose his specialization. Later, he will narrow his field of study according to this choice, and train himself for a vocation through his mastery of his subject. His teachers will be those who have succeeded on the course which he now follows. They

will reflect both the specialist and the general standards of the group with whom the pupil will come to identify himself as an adult.

In such a teaching situation the teacher can enter the classroom confident in the standards of conduct and attainment he intends to demand of his class. Before the process of teaching begins, the end of teaching is defined. The relation of teacher to pupil is that of master to disciple, for the teacher represents the adult world which the pupil will have to enter. This is the traditional view of teaching. Exponents of it have something to learn from other views, but basically their attitude appears quite valid in the academic schools in which they teach. In England, however, such schools, or courses, (for it makes no difference to the issue at stake whether the school be comprehensive or not), contain only a minority of the pupils. The majority are to be found in non-academic secondary schools or courses.

A commitment to the idea of secondary education for all implies that we give our pupils something more than the basic literacy dispensed by the old elementary school. But where do we find our standards?

We cannot merely base the curriculum on vocational preparation, though we may offer some vocational training. In the first place it is felt that the knowledge and skills appropriate to the vocations into which the children will enter do not offer the broad educational influences which the academic disciplines do. Secondly, the pupils will enter a diversity of occupations which make different demands and in some cases require very little educational background.

Moreover, we find that the general standards of the social groups to which these pupils will belong are not held in high repute in society, and are sometimes regarded as a social problem. The situation is complicated because the teachers' own standards are usually quite unlike those which hold in the pupils' future background.

It is primarily in such situations, where standards are insecure, that a radical progressive approach to teaching and to the curriculum is appropriate.

There appear to be two other possibilities. The first is to attempt to instil into the non-academic child a respect for the specialist academic cultures he cannot enter. This is to place him in the position of Plato's men with souls of brass or iron, looking up to others with souls of more precious metals. The second is to try to make the children accept the teacher's general standards though they cannot reach his

academic standards. This is to attempt to win the working-class
to middle-class standards in moral and social attitudes. Neit
these courses appears to me to be desirable.

A radical progressive approach to education does not prescri
curriculum to be followed. Curriculum content is determined
interest of the pupil. This principle is perhaps too vague, la
responsibility on the teacher too heavy for all but the most talente
sensitive to bear.

We may perhaps arrive at a more precise idea if we beg
asking, not what should be the content of the curriculum, bu
worthwhile standards can be achieved in classroom work. The
gressive will tend to urge us, not to bring our standards into the
room and inflict them on the children, but rather to take our stan
from the children or, better perhaps, to generate our standa
the social interchange of the classroom. There are obvious dang
such a suggestion, and we must be more particular in distingu
good standards from bad.

Good 'child-centred' standards are attained when the teac
able to make the pupils accept their work as a challenge. On this
the class can work together, refining and disciplining their stan
through self-criticism in the classroom discussion.

The problem of curriculum can now be expressed as follows:
worthwhile curriculum content can we find as a focus for a class
experience which will provide this challenge and which will stin
the pupils to an attempt to find for themselves standards whic
worthwhile and viable in terms of their own experience of life?

We noticed earlier an interpretation of a general education a
concerned with those problems which arise from the general exper
of social intercourse and of the human lot. These problems
perhaps serve as the basis for a secondary school curriculum fo
non-academic child.

We are helped here by the fact that the secondary school pu
already looking forward to adult society. He is capable of bein
terested in adult problems such as war, race relations, propag
human cruelty, or relations between the sexes. A curriculum su
we have just proposed could consist, not of subjects, but of proble
this sort.

The class are to study and discuss, let us say, war, but how are

eanings which support a
, because there is fed into
, man's knowledge and
rds, they read about war,
ok at pictures about war
out to discover for them-
d then to go on to under-
h mankind can no longer

till the arts and sciences,
about these as disciplines
on-academic child learns
thinking.
d of cultural laboratory
d at a humble level. The
m one culture to another,
unity to feed their own
build for themselves an
hinking. Whereas in the
ervant of his subject, and
it, in the non-academic
his pupils, asking himself
he quality of their living.
could learn from such
of their subjects to life.