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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'. 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 some-
thing'. We assert that there must be a medium bridging the subjective

1 A. H. Halsey, Jean Floud and C. Arnold Anderson (editors), Education, Economy
2 Banesh Hoffmann, The Strange Story of the Quantum, London: Pelican edition,
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experiences of minds which communicate with one another and identify this as culture. In doing so, we have not suggested what culture is, but merely suggested its function or location in interaction.

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

If we carry our dubious but helpful analogy with light a further, we may say that, although we have an immediate perceptual representation of light, as when we observe light rays, yet the physical analysis of light takes us into a conceptual world beyond this immediate one of physical impression, and quite different from it. It speaks, for instance, of waves and particles which are not visible. 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 symbols, pictures. Music may also be regarded as a highly abstracted system. All these ‘languages’ are anchored in culture.

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

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

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

Values represent consensus in evaluation, in judgements of good, bad, better or worse. They are socially approved ends in the broad sense. To say this is, of course, not a statement about the justifi-
values, but about the dynamics of values. Values are points of consensus created and reinforced in social interaction. Changes in 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 undertake the learning involved in taking a medical degree associates us with the group, doctors, and dissociates us from groups such as teachers, dustmen and gamekeepers. This implication of the idea that 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 assertion of sociologists that education is concerned with the transmission of 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, the class. If he teaches them subtraction by decomposition or laboratory procedure or Hamlet or Ibsen, he gives them something in common as a group. As he does so, he cuts them off from other groups and associates them with yet other groups whose classroom experience is closer to their own.

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

Groups achieve communicative interaction through that consensus we have called culture. Communicative interaction is a basic requirement of satisfactory group life, and therefore the group naturally seeks to maintain its culture. The whole system of interaction depends upon the general prediction of the lines of consensus within the group. All members of the group will expect other members to converge in 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 by 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 empathic 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 reflection 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 are teacher to teach not subjects but, as it were, himself, he would were successful, merely trap the pupils in his own culture. According he has to base the experience of the classroom on some object in curriculum material. Because the arts and sciences are prime modes of innovation, they offer two marked advantages as curriculum. 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 because presents perennial ideas as if they were new, just what is required in the teaching situation, where that which is familiar in the curri must be discovered anew by the individual. The second strength of these traditional elements in the curriculum is that they introduce pupil not only to a content of ideas, but also to the arts and sciences as modes of innovation which he can in his turn learn to use creatively. In these subjects the creative and conservative functions of education are most intimately fused.

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

In the light of the foregoing analysis of the teaching process it content, we can perhaps make an approach to the problem of general and specialist education.

We may say that the core of the teaching process lies in the teacher's judgement of the standards adopted by the pupils. According to own standards, the teacher deploys his rewards and punishments, encouragement and discouragement in order to influence the standards of the group. These group standards form the basis of the pressures which in turn influence the individual standards of the group members. The question of the sources of the teacher's standards arises, and we shall expect to find these standards accepted from 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 education for clerical and similar occupations. The most powerful critic of the elementary school teacher was the employer. For the teacher employers tended to become a reference group for standards. Calculation, neat handwriting and so forth were at a premium.
It might even say to the pupil: 'What do you think your employer will say to work like that?'

Today, the primary school hands the children on to the secondary school and often to higher education. For primary teachers, the primary group for standards tends to become secondary teachers and academics. Now, the primary teacher tends to ask whether her approach to the teaching of number is a good basis for later mathematics teaching. Primary education thus becomes a kind of general education groundwork, leading to secondary and higher education which tends to become specialized. The specialized standards of the secondary school are underwritten by reference to specialized vocational academic groups. Thus standards in science derive from academic search scientists, in literature from university teachers or the approved professional critics, in mathematics from professional mathematicians. At a more specialized level still, professional standards are formed and developed in specialized professional groups, for the medical profession and the legal profession.

In the secondary school and the university that the problem of balance between specialization and general education has been acutely felt. We shall focus our attention on the secondary school except as our point of departure the treatment of the situation in the Byth Report, the most recent English government report on secondary education.

Crowther Committee felt that specialization in academic and technical forms of education was necessary if high academic, vocational professional standards were to be obtained, but expressed reserve about the effects of this on the general educational impact of pupils’ lives. Their solution was to advocate minority time in which there should be an attempt to counterbalance specialist work by contrasting complementary studies. We should attempt to make every academic or technologist both literate and numerate, or in a phrase which has become popular in Britain we should try to marry ‘the two C’s’ of science and the arts. It is fair to say that the idea of balanced education implied here is that of balance. The aspiration is to produce all-rounders.

This prescription is offered only to the intellectual elite. The general education of the majority of the population in the non-academic state 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
The discipline provides a point of view from which experience can be ordered and given meaning. This general effect is achieved, however, only if the study is pursued to a very high level. It is essential for the few, perhaps even for a small élite among the academic disciplines themselves.

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

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

This scarcely accounts for the fact that an academic education is said to help people to handle the problems of common human experience and the social and moral issues of everyday life. Yet I believe this reputation is not entirely false. The fact is that the social values to which an academic education gives entry hold understandings and values of far wider significance than those which support professional competence. They have their own manners and morals, own political and social attitudes. If what we ask of a general education is moral and social standards and ways of coping with life, these groups can be accepted as sources of such standards - but not those of like social situation. The position appears to be that academic schools endorse the cultural standards of those social groups whose successful pupils will enter. In a sense, general education is a matter of curriculum, which is specialist, but of underlying notions, and these assumptions do not have to be driven home forcibly, because the social pressures to which the pupil will be subjected when he finishes his formal education will reinforce the notions of the school. In Britain, students often escape punishment...
for breaches of the law which would certainly be punished in appren-
ticés. 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 under-
write 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 him-
self 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. Neither of these courses appears to me to be desirable.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The class are to study and discuss, let us say, war, but how are
meanings which support a reason, because there is fed into man's knowledge and words, they read about war, look at pictures about war, and then to go on to understand mankind can no longer till the arts and sciences, about these as disciplines non-academic child learns thinking.

of cultural laboratory lived at a humble level. The from one culture to another, opportunity to feed their own to build for themselves an thinking. Whereas in the servant of his subject, and it, in the non-academic his pupils, asking himself the quality of their living. could learn from such of their subjects to life.