

Schools and Socialization

Edward A. Wynne

Some schools do a poor job of preparing youth for responsible adulthood. There are exceptions to this pattern—but we need more of them.



Any activity that takes a lot of time inevitably has a substantial socializing effect. When the person putting in time is young, the effect is more profound, since the adaptive conduct learned—and socialization is essentially a form of learning—is less likely to be contradicted by previous knowledge. Thus, schools have important socializing effects.

It may surprise you that their effects are not necessarily good. In fact, modern schools often do a poor job of socializing students to effective adulthood. I will illustrate with specific

examples, but also mention some good things that are happening. First, however, I want to analyze briefly the nature of adulthood in modern society, because we need an image of what an adult should be like in order to tell whether schools are producing bad or good effects.

Adult Capabilities

Competent adults can make and keep commitments to other people and institutions, be both generous and protective of their own self-interest, take or make a joke, choose between ambiguous alternatives, and live with deferred gratification. These characteristics are important to family and social life, to effective citizenship, and to a gratifying and economically rewarding career.

Some readers may wonder about my juxtaposition of generosity and self-interest. They may argue, for example, that modern paid work puts a premium on the ruthless pursuit of self-interest. I believe this is a misreading of the nature of paid work. In almost all such work, the workers (whether they are laborers or corporation presidents) produce goods or services that satisfy others, who may be either co-workers or customers.

Any workers who routinely disappoint their

co-workers or customers will soon be unemployed. And this demand for satisfaction means that workers must continually strive to understand and gratify the needs of certain others. Thus, their attitudes must be helpful and considerate. Of course, by satisfying co-workers or customers, workers will also be protecting their own self-interest.

In sum, the problem before adults is to be both generous and selfish.

The ambiguity of that challenge is exactly why it takes a great deal of learning—or socialization—to attain an appropriate level of performance. And other such ambiguous learnings are required in marriage and family life. Husbands and wives, parents and children, must develop styles that mix solicitude with the judicious protection of self. For example, adolescents sometimes imagine that in marriage, love—or generosity—is all. However, the high rate of break-ups in adolescent marriages suggests that many young marrieds have problems controlling their own selfishness, or protecting themselves from the selfishness of their immature mates.

Concretely speaking, the personality characteristics I have sketched require adults—especially in more responsible or challenging situations—to display high levels of communication skills. They must know how to listen, ask questions, stay silent, deal with a variety of persons, retain poise under tension, talk tactfully and sometimes firmly, turn a difficult situation into something funny, understand the relationships between themselves and their associates. But we must remember that all these “skills” are largely keyed to managing our personal emotions—keeping cool, being persistent, displaying determination and courage, practicing tact and solicitude. And learning these skills obviously comes through socialization; that is, we learn them by being in close touch with appropriate role models, and by spending time in environments where the skills are routinely practiced and participants are under pressure to learn and apply their skills.

Socialization Problems

Schools do a poor job of socializing students to adulthood. They socialize students to be “school attenders,” but life for most adults is not like

attending school. Some school practices that result in inadequate socialization are:

- Schools group students with others of the same age, often those with similar abilities and interests. (In adult life, we must often work with persons of different ages and diverse abilities.)
- Once students leave self-contained classrooms—at junior high or before—they have limited and transitory relationships with other students and adults. They are surrounded by other people, but the relationships with them are akin to the relationships among people riding in a public bus. (In adult work and family life—unless the adult is a “casual” worker or drifter—more intense and significant relationships are typical.)
- Modern students are seldom expected to give or sacrifice so that their school—and other students in it—may attain some general benefit. (Families, communities, and many work institutions occasionally expect their members to give up something to help the whole.)
- In schools, students rarely have simple, direct power over, or responsibility for, other



persons. (The exercise of such power is a common element in adult life, either in work or parenthood.)

These school practices create a serious disjunction between our students and the adult lives they must eventually lead.¹ But these practices are not inevitable, because they are not found in some other societies and were not characteristic of American schools in earlier times. They result from the spread of educational bureaucracy and specialization, a focus on "economy of scale" (which is often not really economical), excessive dedication to cognitive goals, and emphasis on individualism to the detriment of healthy collective endeavors.

Promising Exceptions

Some exceptions to these tendencies can be found in contemporary American school systems, schools, and teachers. My students, in examining schools throughout the Chicago area, have discovered many examples of healthy inschool socialization policies, including the following examples:

- Some schools (often private ones) stay small because of limited income, and some stay small because educators and parents believe small is good. Furthermore, some school systems have chosen to stay small (or have practiced genuine decentralization), keeping bureaucratic norms under control. With less bureaucracy, there are more possibilities for vitality in all forms of human relations.

- Some schools and teachers try to promote significant interactive experiences among their students. Extraclass activities are an important tool to this end, and school and class programs can either support or undermine them. Another tool is student service activities—fundraising, student-to-student tutoring, and volunteer work of various kinds. Sometimes these activities are encouraged just because the help is needed, but regardless of the reason, they help prepare students for life outside of school.

- Schools that foster extraclass and service activities may establish rewards that stimulate students to improve their performance. Without reward structures, students get the message that

extraclass activities are "nice," but classwork is more important. The irony, is, of course, that available research suggests that performance in extraclass activities is a better predictor of adult success than good grades.

- A fair number of schools make a determined effort to maintain good discipline among their students (and thus to restrain excessive individualism). To attain this end, they adopt and publish clear rules prohibiting antisocial conduct. The rules are consistently enforced by the faculty, and the students understand that violations will

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lead to punishments generally regarded as unpleasant. The punishments applied are of incrementally increasing severity. In cases of moderate and serious violations, parents are quickly notified and are expected to support the school's position.

- Some large schools have been divided into houses or subschools. These arrangements encourage persisting, significant relationships among limited numbers of students, and between students and teachers. They are thus more akin to important adult environments than those found in many large schools.

- Some schools (and classroom teachers) have tried to maintain and stimulate school (and class) spirit by using ceremonies such as pep rallies, homecomings, and assemblies; the school media; and sports and symbols to stimulate student pride, interest, and enthusiasm. When well-managed, these efforts help students develop patterns of emotional response that involve

¹For some statistical evidence demonstrating the harmful effects, see: Edward A. Wynne. "Behind the Discipline Problem." *Phi Delta Kappan* 59(5): 307-15; January 1978.

loyalty, pride, and constructive exuberance. All of these emotions are valuable resources in adult life.

- Some schools and teachers try to maintain close ties between parents and schools. Vital parent/school ties tend to lower the level of bureaucracy in school environments, and encourage the schools to apply policies more relevant to good socialization than policies determined solely by educators.

Whose Fault?

Some readers may agree with most of the items on my "good news" list, but may be distressed because I seem to blame our failings largely on schools and educators. After all, many of the policies I have criticized have been promoted by citizens as well as educators. And many of the improvements I am urging are supported by many educators and opposed by some citizens.

There is no doubt that our current situation is not solely—or even principally—the "fault" of educators. Young people are subject to many important influences beyond schools, and school policies are shaped by many forces beyond the values and priorities of educators. But this journal is addressed to educators, and there is no point in using up my limited space making suggestions to, or criticizing, people who will not read them. Furthermore, although many educators have tried and done "the right thing," many others have not tried hard enough.

For example, many educators do not believe that student-to-student tutoring is worthwhile, so they do not make arrangements that encourage it. Some even view such activities as intrusions on the responsibilities of teachers—as if only teachers are capable of helping others learn. Most educators give lip service to extraclass activities, but there are great differences among the priorities actually given to such activities in the operation of schools. Finally, while no educator is in favor of bad discipline, I have seen many examples of poorly drafted or inadequately enforced school rules, and of situations where there were no provisions for vital, incremental punishments.

The sum of my field impressions about schools and socialization is that too many administrators are disposed to pass the buck. (The

diffusion of responsibilities in a large bureaucracy invites such conduct.)

What Schools Can Do

Obviously, not every good change can be attempted in every school. But, given the variety of changes that seem desirable, there are surely some changes that can be tried almost anywhere. The root problems seem to be first, failure to perceive adequately the urgency of the socialization problem, and second, the tendency to oversimplify the measures needed to correct the situation. This oversimplification leads educators to underplan the changes they attempt, and to prematurely abandon their efforts when difficulties appear. Without priorities and planning, very few important changes work.

Although there are reasons for discouragement, there are also reasons for hope. There is a growing body of objective evidence demonstrating the harmful effects of the current system, including increased rates of youth death by suicide and homicide, sustained high levels of use of harmful substances, and the continuing increase in illegitimate births among both majority and minority youth. These patterns will give support to educators who want to act.

Constructive change may also be helped by the fact that the cost would not be high. Some changes might even bring lower costs eventually. The aim is to reform the patterns of relationships in the school during its operating hours. Students should have more "helping" responsibilities, and relationships among students, and between teachers and students, should become more persisting and intimate.



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