Social Change and Social Reality: Some Implications for Social Studies

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For many educators, social studies is the core of the curriculum. Since it deals with the organization of social groups for living and working together, and with the relation of people to the natural environment, it has obvious relevance for the development of children as involved and responsible members of society. Educators have wanted the children to understand, through their study, that the natural environment frames the way we can function, and to explore the nature of human mastery in the face of different physical realities. They have also wanted them to understand that social organizations take different forms in different times, places, and cultures; to consider the issues that arise under different conditions, and to feel connected to the variety of ways in which people organize their functions and relationships to make a community. Teachers have been concerned with constructing curricula that are developmentally appropriate, matched to the cognitive skills, experiences and emotional strength of children at particular ages. At their best, they have geared the curriculum to questioning and discovery, as well as the organization of relevant information, so that the children might grow as skilled social observers, with a sense of purpose and action in relation to their own environment.

These principles are always valid, but as time goes by there are inevitable and legitimate questions, especially for those who are most deeply and creatively concerned with the relevance of the curriculum: How has society changed, over the last decades, and what are the current

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realities? Have the children been changing, and if so, how? Ought we to rethink the social studies curriculum, and what are the important elements to consider? In this paper, I’ll look at social change and current realities, focusing on the immediate social environment, the modern family, the children themselves, and some implications for the social studies curriculum.

Social Change and the Social Environment

“Social change” is an interesting concept, implying that we all approach “then” and “now” with the same framework. But, of course, our perceptions vary, and the differences are particularly important in the teaching-learning enterprise. What represents “change” for teachers, who are adults, is simply “now” for the children. That’s how it is; this is the world. One implication of this difference in perspective is that we may be more impressed or disturbed by changing elements of social reality than the children are. They may be readier than we think to make their reality a subject of study.

The current social environment, as we all experience it, is a mixture of the gratifying, the inevitable, and the profoundly disturbing, as exemplified by the increased opportunities for women and black people, the pervasive effects of technology on daily life, and the existence of serious and persistent social problems. Children take the gratifying and the inevitable for granted, but the problems come through with a strong impact. They are visible in the immediate environment, especially in the cities, and the children walk into them and through them every day: drugs; AIDS; teen age pregnancy; child abuse and neglect; violence; an increase in grinding poverty, homelessness, begging in the streets; a society that is dichotomized into the separate realities of haves and have nots.

If that is the reality for the children, then it is worth considering whether such matters should be the direct object of social studies—part of the curriculum for 9 and 12 and 14 year olds. It is worth considering, but it will be difficult to deal with for at least two reasons. One has to do with tradition, and with the fact that the traditions have been based on sound psychoeducational principles. The flow of social studies curricula has been constructed to reflect our understanding of child development—the changes in capacity, in the content of what is meaningful, in the style
of thinking. Thus, while the youngest children deal with family and with concrete daily experiences, the curriculum expands, with growth, to neighborhood and local environment, then to cultures of long ago and far away. Ordinarily, middle years children and adolescents have gone beyond the immediate environment to explore the social organization of other times and places. Yet, given the pressing social realities with which they must deal, I am suggesting that part of the social studies curriculum, for these older children, might turn back to issues of neighborhood and community, framed in the more complex but not yet adult terms appropriate to their stage.

The second stumbling block to considering such a revision lies with the adults who must be teachers and guides. It has always seemed important to present the children with a manageable world—not simple or without problems, but open to problem solving and action. Guiding an inquiry into the current organization of society is a difficult challenge for teachers, who must use themselves as the primary instruments of education, especially in an area like social studies, and who are faced, as adults, with the troublesome complexities of modern life. Most of us feel more uncomfortable and powerless than we used to; unsure of how we can function personally as responsible, effective members of society, and uncertain about how the culture can solve its tragic social problems. Perhaps that is one reason why it is difficult to consider limiting curricula for which there are creative materials, cumulative experience and a known framework in order to make room for some study of what is controversial and difficult to resolve. Yet these are the gripping and potent issues for the children, so the dilemma is real. It is clear, however, that any move in this direction would need to develop strong supports for the teachers, who will have to break new ground, find appropriate materials, calibrate the level of inquiry with the capacities and emotional strength of the children, deal with values, and convey a sense of direction in areas of inquiry where none of us feels very competent.

The Family
In considering the family, I will approach the question of change at two levels. One is theoretical. We have developed a different way of looking at families, in recent decades, considering the family as an interactive
system. Some consideration of that theory is important, since it has implications for our understanding of development, and of the child as a learner. The other level is sociological. It has to do with the nature and shape of the modern family, and with implications of current realities for understanding the child and for reviewing the social studies curriculum.

**The family as a system.** Four principles of family systems theory are relevant for this paper. They can be briefly summarized as follows (see also Minuchin, 1985):

First, from the perspective of systems theory, any family is an organized and integrated unit. It’s a small society with patterns and ways of doing things that amount to a signature or a set of fingerprints. That is always true, even if the family seems disorganized and unsupportive; there’s a difference between saying a family is well organized, in a way we might approve of, and understanding that any family has organized and repetitive patterns, for better or worse. Every family has describable ways of expressing affection, anxiety, anger; taking care of people (or not); making decisions and handling conflict; carrying out chores; sorting out the roles and power of males and females, older and younger generations; relating to the outer world, and so forth. And all family members participate in the patterns, contributing to their creation, maintaining them, and functioning within them. Even if behavior seems chaotic, it occurs within the expectations and rules that govern functioning in that system.

A second primary principle is that of circularity. The assumption of circularity challenges the usual assumptions about cause and effect, which are linear, and which suggest that this kind of overprotection causes that kind of obstreperous behavior. The idea here, rather, is that patterns go in cycles, like pushing at a table that pushes back, both forces determining whether the table will move and, if so, how far. So, protective parents and helpless children—or overprotective parents and obstreperous children—are locked together in cycles that are triggered from any point and maintained by all participants. That principle leaves you without anybody to blame. It also means that if you want to create change in a pattern, you can theoretically enter at any point in the cycle.

A third principle: The family has subsystems. The adults as spouses are one subsystem, the siblings are another, each child and each parent is
a subsystem, and so forth. The subsystems are both independent and interrelated. That is, each unit has boundaries around it (metaphorically), so that spouses have their patterns for relating to each other, and children have their patterns for playing together, fighting and working out their quarrels. But the boundaries are also permeable, and there are other patterns that have to do with the interchange between subsystems, such as parents and children interacting with each other.

While the terminology seems cumbersome, the idea of subsystems forces a comprehensive look at the total intimate context within which people live and grow. That’s not so obvious as it sounds. The psychodynamic and developmental theories that have dominated our thinking for decades focused almost exclusively on the dyad of parent and child. But if you think of the family as a system and of its important subsystems, you are forced to consider how the siblings function together, and how the parents, functioning together as a system of authority, relate to the children as a group, mediating quarrels, enforcing discipline, apportioning chores, handling rebellions, and negotiating their own differences in viewpoint and style in the process. All of that is an important part of family life and of children’s experience, though it has been strangely neglected in the psychological literature.

The fourth principle has to do with *cycles of stability and change* in family life. All families are challenged, from time to time, by new realities. Sometimes the trigger is developmental—a new baby is born, a child goes off to school or enters adolescence—and sometimes it is more traumatic and not so predictable: divorce, remarriage, moving to another city, a sudden serious illness in a family member. Whatever the content, it is a challenge to the established patterns of the family. The family cannot continue to function today and tomorrow as it did yesterday, before the baby was born or the parents divorced. There is a conceptual model that describes this transitional period: First, the familiar patterns are challenged by new events. That brings a period of upheaval (disequilibrium), characterized by a search for alternatives and often accompanied by anxiety or conflict, even if the event is pleasant, like the birth of a baby. Then, under normal circumstances, the system slowly reorganizes. People establish new patterns that are comfortable for them and that fit the reality of changed circumstances. The experience of transition is normal; an
inevitable part of the family life cycle. All families go through alternating cycles of stability and change, and its members participate not only in the stable patterns of the relatively smooth periods but in the process of change, creating and internalizing the mechanisms for coping with change that characterize their own family.

A systems perspective on family life changes the way we see and understand school children. We have long understood that families prepare children for school with support, values, information and attitudes that affect the child as an individual: matters of ego strength, self-esteem, the capacity to be a learner, to trust and accept control from adults, to interact with other children. The systems perspective carries us beyond that. It reminds us that children come to school experienced, even expert, in the workings of a social system. They know about social organization, and about how change is handled—the very stuff of social studies. They are not only observers or recipients; they have been part of the patterns by which their family makes decisions (even if they are left out of the process); carries out the chores of a small society (incorporating or ignoring such factors as age, gender, personal preference, temperament); and resolves or escalates problems. They have participated in situations of conflict where the protagonists have unequal authority, like parents and children, and where they are more evenly matched, like siblings. They have been part of the way their family interacts with allied systems, like the extended family, and with more impersonal systems, like schools, the police, social agencies and political processes. And they have been involved in the family’s ways of handling change—the exploration of alternatives, the procedures for tolerating uncertainty, the way in which each individual fits into changing patterns, the knowledge of how the process feels. So children come to school with a wealth of knowledge internalized from living in families, primed for the study of other social systems at a level we may not have sufficiently understood or utilized in the social studies curriculum.

The modern family. There’s a spate of literature on the modern family, most of it concerned with changes in the middle class. In this paper, I will stay within that framework, but it is important to note that there is a growing “third world culture” of poor, multiproblem families in the nation; that their children come to school; and that the social studies
curriculum for these children and about their reality should certainly be seriously considered.

Debate about the modern middle class family often concentrates on whether the family is basically deteriorating or remains fundamentally the same (Skolnick, 1981). Certainly the family is changing, but it is not often acknowledged, in a judgmental analysis, that the family is embedded in a larger, increasingly dangerous culture, and that parents, often criticized for abdication, actually have more extensive and difficult functions than they used to. They must protect the young from profound, sometimes life-threatening dangers in the social environment. They need to begin when their children are quite young, worrying about bizarre issues like sexual abuse in day care centers or possible drug use among baby sitters, and changing the focus of concern, as their children grow older, to drug pushing around grade school, early sexual activity, violence in streets and subways, and a host of temptations and dangers that cross the paths of their adolescent children. Parents who care about their children, which means almost all parents at all levels of society, deal with weighty questions: How tight a boundary do you draw around the family? What’s possible, and how do you enforce the rules? What’s the right balance between autonomy and control, in relation to free access to the world outside the family, for 12 year olds? for 15 year olds? Today’s parents are responsible for rearing children in very stressful circumstances, and it is not difficult to understand why they flounder or retreat.

Other implications of “deterioration” have to do with changes in the organization of the family. The facts are well known. A high percentage of mothers go to work every day; there are more divorces, more single parent families, more remarriage, and so forth. So children grow up in situations where there may be complex arrangements for their care: where they may be expected to carry more responsibilities than we have usually associated with 8 or 11 year olds; where there are traumatic transitions to deal with, during which adults may be more distracted and irritable than strong and available; where children may be involved in basically adult battles; and where they may need to function in two separate parental households, sometimes with new stepparents and half siblings.

What are the implications for child growth and functioning? We all know there is an emotional cost. Psychology has focused on anxiety,
stress, and their negative effects ever since we became knowledgeable about psychodynamic theory, and so we are aware of the anger, guilt and pain of children who live in such situations. It’s important to consider other aspects, however: the difference between transitional periods and the stable situations that may follow; and the possible strength that can come from stressful situations, in the form of coping skill and resilience.

The principles of systems theory remind us that periods of change are inevitable and that chaotic conditions are not usually sustained. Points of family transition mark periods of trial and error, and they’re generally stressful. We often see the children in school, during these periods, and we spot their worry and distraction. But, especially if we are sensitive, we sometimes nourish that perception beyond the period when the family has reorganized and settled down to its new reality.

These situations are complex, but they are not necessarily destructive to the growth and ego strength of the children. Mavis Hetherington, who has been studying children in divorced families for a number of years, points to the resilience, resourcefulness and strength of at least some of these children (Hetherington, 1988). It appears that simplicity and ongoing stability do not provide the only possible context for strong and healthy child growth. Transitions and complicated family maps are not necessarily permanently damaging, and psychologically useful things may occur over time in complex situations.

If we are interested in the modern family, both as a changing institution in society and as the basic setting for child growth, it is relevant to raise the question, again, of the social studies curriculum. Should the children be studying the American family at older ages and in a different way than we currently provide for? Certainly it is possible to raise questions, accumulate material, and organize age appropriate learning activities for 11, 12, 14 year olds, focused on the modern family as a part of society. What are the alternative forms? How and why did they come about, at this time and place? What about families in other cultures and times? What were and are the functions of a family; how do they relate to other institutions, like the school or religious institutions, or government? How have new ideas about gender, sexual preference and sexual mores, working women and father-child relations interacted with family life? What’s the source and meaning of child abuse? What’s the relation of teen
age pregnancy and the longer life span to the family life cycle? These are not the questions of 5 year olds; they are the kinds of questions older children raise and care about, and they can be studied in age appropriate ways. Families have become a focus of scholarly study over the past 15 or 20 years (see Skolnick, 1981), and there’s no dearth of historical, sociological, economic, ethnic material to make the topic intellectually respectable. At the same time, it may give middle years and adolescent children an important way to focus and explore their daily reality and their impending choices.

Such a curriculum should also involve family members, as resources and participants in the systematic data gathering of these older students. Young adolescents can begin to function with the tools of a social scientist: interviewing, mapping family trees, organizing data. And parents can participate differently than they do with the young children, when they characteristically come to school to cook an ethnic meal or talk about their heritage. Here they would be co-investigators, helping their children map the family, or exploring the rules and workings of the family system, in which they all participate. They can be interviewed about their priorities and values; their views on work, gender, social issues, what they want for their children; their recollections about how their parents saw these issues, so that a three generational perspective emerges. It would be the task of the children to polish their interviewing skills and to coordinate the information, in the school group and with teachers, by discussion, charting, comparing. But in the gathering of the material, it is possible for the generations to be involved in a mutual and important contact focused on the family, discussing facts and issues in ways they may not often use but which are probably available if the structure is provided. The content is social studies and the purpose is learning, but the contact is likely to be a force for increased understanding among family members and a more informed, tolerant view of how different generations come to hold the views that they do.

Such a suggestion raises concerns for teachers about privacy and separation between adolescents and their parents, and certainly the curriculum would need to be flexibly designed and wisely administered. But, as in consideration of a social studies curriculum focused on current social problems, there is a trade-off to consider. It no longer seems
possible to protect the children from realities they deal with every day. A direct consideration of the issues, anchored in facts and argument and enlightenment, may bring an increase in personal mastery, as well as social knowledge.

The Children

In this review of changing reality, we come finally to the children. Have they changed, as society has changed, and if so, how?

A few years ago, Zimiles (1982) wrote an interesting paper on the changing American child, based on interviews with teachers. In this material, the impact of television on information and cognitive style stands out. Children appear to know more than they used to, and they are often more verbal, expressive and self-assured, but the prevalent cognitive style is disturbing for thoughtful teachers. The children are oriented toward small bits, packaged units, quick conclusions, and they have little patience with open questions, complexity, the slow process of collecting information and debating implications. It appears, also, that they care less about school and its importance than they used to, and that they may also care less about other people and social issues—or, at least, that it is more difficult to engage them in social studies than it used to be.

But some things about children don’t change, and perhaps it is well to review them. They don’t change because they follow an underlying developmental clock. They are under development during the school years, and teachers have some chance to harness and influence what is happening, even if that requires uphill effort against dominant trends. We can consider two areas, one having to do with the mind and the other with the spirit.

First, cognitive growth. We know that children slowly mature in their capacity to grasp the nature of an organized system (Piaget). As they move into the middle years, they become more able to put ideas together and deal with relational concepts. Those concrete operations mean they can see the connections that make a society function: how cars, speeding laws, traffic lights, traffic cops, and penalties are related; how population growth and building are connected, and how the phenomenon of homeless people in an affluent society is puzzling. Their growing capacities also mean that they can grasp the logic of a problem solving approach to
learning (Dewey), following the sequence from the raising of questions through the gathering and coordination of information to the exploration of implications: what do we know and where does that lead? The capacity to make connections and understand a sequential process grows through maturation, experience and feedback, but the way in which it is honed and applied is not a given. It has to evolve and be directed, and teachers are there during the fluid, formative period. The use of an inquiry, problem solving process for social studies is crucially important, if we are to harness the children’s potential for investigating and understanding the social order. It is especially important because we know that television and other forces pull another way, and that the orderly quality of computerized instruction is not only an inevitable development of education but clearly appropriate for some other areas of study.

The more social, interpersonal aspect of development, during the school years, involves the growing ability to see events from the perspective of another person, and to deal with issues of fairness and justice—coupled, I would say, with a useful capacity for indignation. We know that children come to see people, as well as events, from a multiple perspective, and that they slowly develop an ethical system, which serves partly as a way of thinking and partly as a guide to action. All of that is there to be mobilized in the study of people living together, and in the consideration of social problems in today’s society.

I have added the capacity for indignation to the usual list because I think it is a reliable motor for caring. It starts in the self-centered experiences in families and in peer groups: Is this family fair? Is my brother getting more than me? Do the rules of this game protect me? But it can move, with development, to a more objective capacity to see how justice and fairness may look to others, and how certain social structures are not just and should be altered. So these aspects of personal and social development are also there to be mobilized for the intense and interested investigation of social systems. The dominant values of families and cultures never have a complete lock on the development of school children. The generic developmental trends are also there and in formation, and teachers, especially social studies teachers, have a fair chance of using and shaping them.
Summary

In this paper on social reality and the social studies curriculum, I have made the following suggestions, for the consideration of educators:

1) to review the usual sequence of curriculum materials, in which the children move from a focus on the immediate environment to study of other times and cultures. Given social change and the current social reality, as well as the issues of choice and citizenship for children growing up in a difficult world, it may be productive to reintroduce family, neighborhood and community as topics for older children, using age-appropriate foci, materials and methods.

2) to involve families in the social studies curriculum, as a topic of study and, wherever possible, as co-investigators with their children of current social issues in families and society.

3) to hold urgently to inquiry and problem solving models of learning in the social studies area. If other forces in society and education push superficial information, quick conclusions, and concrete achievement, it is especially important to provide children with experience in exploratory, complex and sustained processes of learning. Social studies is the most logical and relevant area for that approach, especially since the issues that are raised can hardly be handled effectively in any other way.

4) to retain faith in the sturdiness of children and their availability as learners. At a time when we are worried about family pressures and crumbling values, it is essential to focus on the coping and resilience of the children, and on the developmental aspects of mind and spirit that can always be mobilized by creative teachers.

5) to perceive educators as instruments rather than conduits of information, and to develop resources and support systems for teachers as they explore new topics in social studies, especially in areas that touch on the confusions and values of all adults in today’s society.
References