# A DIGEST OF EDUCATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

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A digest of educational sociology by  David Snedden

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DAVID SNEDDEN

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# A Digest of Educational Sociology

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# CHAPTER I

## THE MEANING OF EDUCATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

### A. Introductory

Sociology denotes the science and study of human social groupings, including the factors that condition such social groupings, the evolution of group forms, and the processes by which groups may be improved, both as collective agencies and as means of promoting qualities desired in individuals. Human social groups are of many kinds in form and in functioning.

Education may be distinguished as of two kinds—that carried on in schools or other agencies, specialized for educational purposes; and that effected as a by-product of vocational pursuits, family nurture, worship, recreation, social control, defence, and the like. Both kinds of education are designed, in so far as they are at all purposive, to prepare, adjust, or re-shape individuals for increased usefulness to themselves or to others (including deities), according as such usefulness is conceived at the time.

Many social groupings are relatively permanent—nations, cities, churches—while it is the constant desire of the best members of society that others, less continuous—families, corporations, parties, labor unions—shall take approved forms and functions.

But individual members of all groups come and go—their effective membership in all groups rarely exceeding fifty years, and being in fact commonly only two or three decades. Hence a large part of purposive education has always been designed rather to prepare the individual child, youth, or adult for more effective fitting into one or more groups than for usefulness to himself—although in the long run the two forms of usefulness tend in the main to coincide.

Furthermore, by all ordinary standards, *social* or *group* life tends to become more involved, more extensive, more potential of good or bad results—states become larger, customs must be replaced by laws, economic specialization and interdependence increase. The processes of preparing the young for good group membership become more difficult, require more scientific knowledge, necessitate more complicated administration.

Hence the convictions of modern peoples that a constantly increasing amount of purposive and systematic education of both young and adults is needed to insure right social membership on the part of oncoming generations of individuals.

In its prescientific stages, both the specific objectives (aims, purposes) of education and its methods were crystallized in customs and traditions, products usually of insensible accretions, perpetuated by "trial and success"

processes, and occasionally by the inventiveness of a genius. Under dynamic social conditions educational practice often lags heavily, as do practices in other departments where custom and precedent play large parts—religion, law, sumptuary standards. (Cf. China, England, classical education, education of women, and unnumbered instances in current curricula.)

The twentieth century finds many attempts to make education more varied, extended, flexible, individualized, socially functional. Movements for "enrichment of curricula," for "child study," and for socialization of school life are symptomatic of new interests and points of view. Psychology, always expected to furnish guidance to methods of teaching, has lately reached the point where it can actually do so. Educational administration becomes scientific in certain material aspects—buildings, finance, control.

But endless old difficulties persist and new ones develop because objectives remain so largely on faith levels—tied up in beliefs, customs, traditions, radical aspirations, the catch-words and formulae of partisan cults and sects. Sociology itself, just emerging from metaphysical swaddling clothes, has not been regarded as a promising source of guidance. Little scientific effort has yet been given to direct analysis of aims and values in any but a few departments of education.

Ultimately, a developed sociology must chiefly provide the objectives required to give definiteness of purpose to major and minor educational procedures. Sociology must reveal what are the goals expected to be realized for individuals (of various kinds and potentialities) as well as for social groups through their adjusted individual members. Out of a thousand possible paths that may be taken by education there must, in a given situation, be found the score that are most timely and essential, while psychology will provide means of ascertaining the educabilities of given individuals and the most effective means of reaching stated goals. Some concrete problems will reveal existing needs.[1]

1. For many years American elementary schools have made much of the subjects of arithmetic, as the high schools have of algebra and plane geometry. In each case the subjects have grown in elaborateness and complexity while various traditions have gained currency as to their educational values. Private schools, women's colleges, and other habitually conservative institutions still impute mystic values to algebra and geometry, as, naturally, also successful laymen, whose conceptions of educational values were formed two or more decades ago.

If systematic experimentation (for which education is now ready in this field) should show that the mathematical subjects, and especially their more involved and less "practical" phases, possess unique values for mental training (discipline of "reasoning powers," etc.) analogous to the alleged values of Indian clubs or the trapeze in physical discipline, then, of course, justification for the prescription of these subjects for admission

(1) See Snedden, D., "Educational Sociology." *Am. Jour. of Soc.* 25:129.

to college, graduation from high school, or promotion in elementary school would exist.

Apart from these still uncertain values, the mathematical studies possess obvious values to some or all individuals and therefore to society. Certain vocations—electrical engineering, bookkeeping, pharmacy, artillery direction, navigation, the plumber's trade—require, respectively, for their successful prosecution certain specialized knowledge and ability to use mathematics. All persons must buy commodities, and all ought to read journals, and to invest savings ("consumers needs"). For each of these functions some (perhaps not much) knowledge of arithmetic is very desirable, if not indispensable, for all. Here we find justification for "general mathematics."

But our methods of meeting "social needs" through these studies are now probably ill-adjusted and wasteful in extreme. General arithmetic is filled with topics appropriate only for specialized vocations. Very few girls can ever expect to use algebra vocationally. Slow children are seldom well trained in needed elemental processes. Essential "approximation" calculation is neglected. Cultural ("appreciation") values are rarely realized.

Can we now as results of careful studies of social needs: (*a*) define "consumers needs" which should be basis of general or universally prescribed arithmetic; (*b*) define actual prevocational offerings possible to elementary school, high school, and liberal arts college, holding them as electives for persons reasonably sure of needing them; (*c*) define the specialized mathematics appropriate to various types of vocational (basic and extension) schools; and (*d*) promote the development of "appreciation" subjects as elective offerings to increase "general culture"? Here lie important fields of investigation.

2. Much time is now given in elementary schools to the teaching of "oral reading." Nevertheless most adults (including, sad to say, most teachers) read aloud poorly. Once when books and papers were scarce oral reading served a useful social function—can it ever again? We all move towards silent reading, individualized to tastes and needs. Only a half-score of vocations put a premium on the "good oral reader." These questions of social objective now need answers: (*a*) Under present conditions are oral reading abilities of any special significance to adults generally, for cultural, civic or vocational purposes? (*b*) Is "silent reading," now obviously a universal need, well taught (or systematically taught at all) at present? (*c*) Except in very elementary stages (first two grades) is oral reading probably a hurtful rather than a helpful means of teaching silent reading? (*d*) What are the vocations which really require oral reading, and for them can it be elected in advance as a prevocational[1] subject or can it best be given in a vocational school?

(1) A subject is here called "prevocational" when its functioning in a given vocation is known, whilst its character is such that it can profitably be taught in schools normally attended before entry on vocational schools. Trigonometry taken in high schools by students expecting to enter engineering schools, "pre-medical" biology, and "prelegal" economics taken in liberal arts colleges, are established examples.

3. The several states now expend together probably between eight and ten million dollars annually on modern language instruction in high schools. What are the purposes, and what the present results, of this expenditure? What results do we expect in terms of adult powers of reading? speaking? written composition? What standards do we hold of these powers, and what expenditures of time and energy have we estimated to be necessary to their realization? What are really our expectations as to obscure cultural appreciations—of peoples, literatures, reactions on English, vocational guidance? Are these realized? Why do we permit, even encourage, sometimes prescribe, *two* modern languages when tangible results in one are very doubtful? Hardly any criticism can be too severe in reference to the superficial, aspirational, hit-or-miss objectives of American modern language instruction. Difficulties involved are more fundamental than poor methods of teaching. They lie first in domain of social purposes.

Elaborate studies of social need should soon be provided. (*a*) Is it important that *some* American adults should, in the next generation, read with ease one of these: French, German, Japanese, Russian, Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese? How many, roughly, in each—for their own vocational needs? for the social needs of the nation? for society's needs of radiant sources of cultural appreciations? Similarly, are speaking (and auditory) powers necessary? Writing powers? For what numbers?

(*b*) What investment of time and learning energy will normally be required in the case of persons of super-average native linguistic abilities to attain to profitable powers in above directions, if learning is begun at age 20? 18? 14? Is earlier beginning—at age 6 or 2—practicable for public education?

(*c*) What means shall be employed: (1) to select schools which should or can profitably undertake teaching of one or more modern language? (2) to select the learners who shall be encouraged, perhaps endowed, to pursue such studies to worth-while ends?

4. The place of the fine arts in modern life is as yet far from clear, and hence the responsibilities of the schools are naturally most uncertain. Here is still an active battleground of faiths, aspirations, prejudices—protagonistic and antagonistic. A marked example can be found in music. The American people now spend much wealth on music of commercial (and often mechanical) kinds. Persons fond of "better" music believe standards of utilization should be raised, but their reasons seem to rest largely on unproven assumptions. We need sociological studies of these questions: (*a*) What are the primary, and what the incidental, functions of music in modern life—moral refinement and uplift, filling leisure time richly, promotion of socialization (sociability, harmony), furthering of right worship?

(*b*) What are the best means of causing music to function desirably—training a few to advanced powers of execution (vocational or specialized amateur), training many talented ones to moderate powers of execution