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Developing Social Sensitivity

with special reference to the New Curriculum
"Enterprise" at Friends' Central School,
Overbrook, Pennsylvania

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Geologists tell us that occasionally some sections of a huge layer of rock shift or slide so much that an uneven line or break results where there was once a uniform line. Altho these dislocations may appear suddenly, they usually occur only after long processes of change have taken place inside the earth. The results of such shifts are known to scientists as fault-lines.

In a similar way society continues for years without any radical changes in its external appearances. Then come periods of change, apparently sudden and violent in their methods and results but in reality merely the climax of long periods of transformation within society as a whole or within its component parts. As a result, social dislocations take place and fault-lines in our social structure are revealed.

Today we are witnessing these processes of change. Fault-lines in our democratic society are vividly apparent as a result of such disturbances as a world war, a major depression, the reappearance of that social phenomenon known as dictatorship, and the rumblings of another world cataclysm.

These weaknesses have existed before. There have been minor disturbances from time to time, but today we know that the stratum is still moving and we cannot predict the extent of the fault-lines that are appearing.

As "social geologists" we are entrusted with the task of examining contemporary society and its social dislocations. We are expected to use our microscopes and analyze discontent. We are expected to use our seismographs to detect further rumblings. More important, we are commissioned to train the present generation as social scientists sensitive to the faults in our existing social order and willing and anxious to create an order where such faults occur less frequently.

The success of our democratic system depends in large measure upon the way in which we develop this social sensitivity among the present student generation and find outlets for its translation into action. If the purpose of our educational system is to train citizens to live and participate effectively in democracy, then we must make them aware of the imperfections in democracy and challenge them to find means of correcting those imperfections.

Education in the past has been prone to preserve rather than to perfect. As a result we have retained the bad as well as the good merely because it was handed down to us from the past. It is not proposed to replace this attitude with its direct counterpart—the discarding of everything from the past just because it shows signs of age. The plea is made, however, for a realistic approach to the examination of our democratic society in a sincere attempt to pass it on to the next generation in an improved condition.

In its *Conclusions and Recommendations* the Commission on the Social Studies drew up a bill of indictment against certain features of our social order today. It spoke of "privation in the midst of plenty, violations of fiduciary trust, gross inequalities in income and wealth . . . wasteful use of natural resources

. . . the maladjustment of production and consumption. . . ."[1] Then it concluded this summary of the fault-lines in our democratic society with the alternatives from which we must choose. It said in part, "If historical knowledge is any guide, these tensions, accompanied by oscillations in popular opinion, public policy, and the fortunes of the struggle for power, will continue until some approximate adjustment is made between social thought, social practice, and economic realities, or until society, exhausted by the conflict and at the end of its spiritual and inventive resources, sinks back into a more primitive order of economy and life."[2] Our task is clearly outlined. We must bend our efforts towards hastening this adjustment between social thought, social practice, and economic realities by the use of knowledge, the development of attitudes, and reliance upon the spiritual and inventive genius of the American people.

In developing this awareness to the needs of society there are several major considerations that we must bear in mind. First of all we must focus our attention at various points in the curriculum upon those basic problems which confront society. That may be done at various age levels and with materials from different times and places. The problems of nationalism and imperialism, the treatment of racial, religious, and political minorities, the uneven distribution of economic resources and of personal wealth are recurring themes in the story of mankind. Whether history is taught chronologically or topically, these problems should be discussed and the ways in which they have been dealt with should be emphasized.

The emphasis, however, should be upon the contemporary aspects of these issues. Therefore, the textbook cannot be the only source of information. Movies, trips, surveys, magazines, plays, and talks must supplement the scant amount of textbook material available. Students are more apt to become aware of housing conditions thru such a play as "One Third of a Nation" than they are thru many days of classroom recitation. They are more likely to feel the severity of racial persecution thru an interview with a German refugee than they are thru hours of class discussion. They will certainly be more sensitive to the problem of income levels after a visit to a social settlement house than after many pages of the best textbook available. Every technic of modern teaching has its contribution to this job of creating an awareness of social maladjustments.

In the second place we must attack the defeatist attitude by proving that these problems are capable of solution. In the past, action has not been taken on many problems because the public as a whole has been unaware of existing conditions. The unfortunate correlary of that statement is that when they have known the facts, they have shrugged their shoulders and either passed the responsibility on to someone else or have dismissed from their minds any idea of reform as useless. A cartoon in the *Christian Science Monitor* recently pictured the communist soapbox orator, the fascist adherent to force in government and business, and the indifferent voter as "Democracy's Three Enemies." I am inclined to believe that the third is by far the most serious problem in the United States at the present time.

Here again history and contemporary affairs can both contribute. The story of civilization is the story of

[1] Report of the Commission on the Social Studies. *Conclusions and Recommendations of the Commission.* Scribner's 1934. p. 18.

[2] *Ibid.,* p. 19.

man's conflict with nature and human nature. He has conquered the air, the water, the earth, and many of the elements. He has outlawed slavery, serfdom, many dread diseases, and superstitions. His inventive genius has produced the telephone, telegraph, radio, and now television. Nor are all of his accomplishments in the past. The overthrow of Tammany control in New York City, the success of the city manager movement in Cincinnati against an intrenched political machine, and the development of a powerful peace movement in this country are three indications of the power of an aroused electorate in recent years. Looking at his past performances, there is no reason for man to be the victim of an inferiority complex. It is our duty to offset this sense of frustration in the midst of seemingly insurmountable obstacles by stressing the accomplishments of man and his potential power for good.

This awareness to the problems of society and this optimistic approach to their solution will go for naught unless we develop at the same time a personal responsibility towards existing conditions. The attitude is so often taken that one person can do nothing, that we have almost come to accept it as true. If we have adopted such an attitude, we have already lost faith in the democratic process, for in a democracy it is the power of single individuals taken collectively that determines the end result. Some months ago the *Reader's Digest* carried an article entitled "You." In it the writer spoke of some of the great victories of men and women who are now ranked as immortals. He then raised the question of what might have happened if they had taken the defeatist attitude and had said that they could do nothing in a world of two billion persons.

We must stress with our students the importance of individual action. No matter in what movement they become interested—the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts, the Big Brothers or Big Sisters, slum clearance or unemployment insurance, labor or peace—everyone can perform an important part, even if it is limited to the creation of public opinion in himself.

In the complexity of modern civilization the law of the jungle cannot prevail. We cannot blithely assume the survival of the fittest, for the survival of any one of us is dependent upon the survival of all of us. Call it religion if you will, or social justice, or even common sense, the fact remains that modern man is his brother's keeper. Our job is to develop this sense of individual responsibility for the welfare of the group.

In the fourth place we must try to inculcate in our pupils the idea that progress comes slowly and painfully. It is part of adolescent psychology to picture themselves as Don Quixotes and to wander forth, imaginatively at least, to tilt with windmills. Here again history will come to our rescue if we will but allow it. We can trace the idea of international organization back as far as Grotius, St. Pierre, Penn, and others. It has taken hundreds of years for this idea to find translation into a League of Nations or a World Court, but those organizations do exist, feeble tho they may be. Progress has come with glacier-like slowness, but it has come.

Our fifth basic consideration may seem a bit contradictory. I have already touched upon it but I want to list it as a separate item and by so doing emphasize it as of equal importance with the other four. Youth is easily discouraged. It is likewise highly impressionable. We are so apt to become conscious of the evils in our day that we are likely to overlook the values that exist in contemporary society. Our newspapers, our magazines, our newsreels, every instrument of communication con-

tinues its barrage of facts about the fault-lines in the modern world. Wars, murders, floods, assassinations, suicides—all these and many more calamities bear in upon our minds day by day.

It is with a sense of relief that we read such accounts of the effectiveness of democracy as are found in Edwin Muller's "Paradox of the Satisfied Swiss" [3] and in Thomas Mann's *Coming Victory of Democracy*.[4] These should renew our faith in ourselves and our system of government and economics, at the same time that they point out certain modifications which should be made.

People of all ages need encouragement. They need to believe in the ideas for which they are working. The social studies teacher must bear this aspect of human nature in mind as he attempts to develop this much needed sense of social sensitivity.

The nature and size of this job demand that everyone connected with education assist in developing social mindedness. The objectives of the English department should include the psychology of human relations and the social implications revealed in literature. The objectives of the science department should include the treatment of public health and sanitation and personal hygiene, and their effect on the community and the nation.

Likewise, the atmosphere of the classroom and of the entire school should reflect this social mindedness which we have been considering. Every technic of a democratic society that has any bearing on the formation of attitudes and the furtherance of democratic training should be applied in school situations. In the classroom, students should be able to experience the committee method and the forum technic, two of the foundations of a democratic society. In their student government they should be given as much responsibility as they can possibly handle. In their relations with faculty and students there should be a cooperative spirit. In the guidance program great care must be taken to recognize the inherent worth and potential possibilities of every student. We must exhibit the same spirit of social awareness in handling their problems as we expect them to use later in handling the social problems with which they must wrestle.

There are very few schools today which have not seriously considered the relation between this objective of education and their existing curriculum. There are still a few schools which think that they can meet this objective with the traditional courses in chronological history. Their number is increasingly smaller.

There are now a large percentage of schools which offer separate courses in civics, sociology, current events, or problems of American democracy in addition to the traditional chronological courses. Their number is increasingly larger. In most schools it is expected that these courses will assume a large part of the responsibility for developing social sensitivity.

There are a few schools that have gone even farther and have inaugurated experimental courses designed primarily to meet this objective. The high school in Beverly, Massachusetts, offers a course in "Social Agencies" to students who do not plan to go to college. Because it is the school's last opportunity to train in citizenship, this course covers the "public and private agencies which are preventive, educational and remedial in their work." Leaders in these fields speak to the classes and help arrange trips to their institu-

[3] Muller, Edwin. "The Paradox of the Satisfied Swiss." *Reader's Digest*. May 1938.

[4] Mann, Thomas. *The Coming Victory of Democracy*. Knopf. 1938.

tions. The course is designed to call attention to the social problems which exist and the methods being used to eradicate them. According to those in charge, "Special emphasis is placed upon the personal responsibility of high school pupils in these matters."

In other schools the regular classroom treatment of problems has been supplemented by special clubs. In the John Marshall School in Rochester, New York, there is an extracurriculum group of about forty-five students which meets thruout the year to discuss current problems. There is an interchange of ideas thru correspondence, thru international broadcasts, and thru an exchange of student delegations twice a year with a similar group in Toronto, Canada. Last year a small number within this club were struck by the correlation between broken street lights, petty thefts, false fire alarms, and juvenile delinquency cases in one ward in Rochester. They obtained permission from the City Police Headquarters and the gas and electric light companies to examine their records. Their results were published in the local paper and then presented at a regular meeting of an adult public forum. A committee of citizens was appointed to investigate the possibilities of recreational facilities for that ward and at last report they were drawing up tentative plans to be presented to the local authorities.

The work of the Lincoln School in New York City represents a third approach to acquiring information and developing attitudes of social mindedness by bringing students into actual contact with the "realities of the social order." With the financial assistance of the Sloan Foundation they took students on several extensive field trips last year. In November, fifty ninth-grade pupils lived for eight days in the homes of farmers in New England. They hoped thereby to experience the various phases of a "simple and less mechanized social order as a preparation for a year of study centering on "Living in a Machine Age." Fifty high-school seniors after weeks of reading, research, and discussion on "economic and social planning in a democracy" took a twelve-day trip thru the Tennessee Valley Authority, lived on a farm in Georgia, inspected Greenbelt, and contacted private utility officials. A third trip was taken with a group of fifteen selected eleventh-grade students into Pennsylvania and West Virginia to find firsthand information on the coal and steel industries, "industries which play such a basic part in modern industrial organization, industries which are being tremendously affected by technological displacements."

By the use of evaluation tests growing out of the eight-year study of the Progressive Education Association, this last tour was estimated to have brought more than two years' growth in the consistency and liberality of students' thinking on social issues.

Less elaborate trips within our own communities and in nearby territories would certainly prove just as stimulating and on a smaller scale just as productive of results as this remarkable program of the Lincoln School.

After months of cooperative study and discussion, Friends' Central School adopted as its educational philosophy the statement that "our aim is to meet the needs of the individual and meet them in such a way that he will participate effectively in a democratic society." With that statement in mind, the work of the senior year was entirely revamped last year and a fusion course was inaugurated which emphasizes contemporary affairs. Those responsible for the experiment and those taking part in it were so convinced

of its merit and success that the plan has been adopted again this year with certain changes, due largely to a change in faculty personnel.

"The Individual and Society" is the theme this year and the head of the English department, the head of the history department, and the director of the Nursery School, who is a trained psychologist, are the three teachers in charge. The senior class is divided into three sections which rotate among the three teachers each five weeks. In that way each teacher meets each group twice a year for a period of five weeks in which there is one central theme studied. The entire afternoon from 1 until 2:30 is spent on this course, which replaces the traditional English and history work.

The English department head deals with the general topic of "Literature and Human Relations, Personal and Social." One of his five weeks' periods is devoted to "Minority Groups and Social Drama." That work includes the music, art, architecture, and literature of the Negro, Indian, Scandinavian, Pennsylvania German, and Jew, and a study of social problem plays. His other five weeks is spent on "International Literature." Some of the classic essays, poems, and novels of France, Russia, and the Scandinavian countries are read, together with four novels on life in European nations today. Those books are *Bread and Wine,*[5] on Italy; *A World Can End,*[6] on Russia; *the Mortal Storm,*[7] on Germany; and *Life and Death of a Spanish Town,*[8] on Spain.

The Nursery School director and psychologist deals with the "Individual and His Social Relationships." Psychology is studied with the use of Overstreet's *About Ourselves*[9] as the basic text. The Nursery School is used as a laboratory for observation and from it arises much in the way of family relationships. Books like *The Forsyte Saga*[10] and *They Came Like Swallows*[11] bring out social relationships and family problems thru literature. Use is made of Alice Keliher's *Life and Growth*[12] as a hygiene book.

The history instructor has divided his work on "The Individual and His Government" into a section on "Dictatorships and Democracies" and one on "Standards of Living." The first takes up in detail the philosophies of dictatorships, the reasons for their rise, and conditions today in those countries. Those are contrasted and compared with the democracies and an attempt is made to study some of the suggested methods of strengthening our own democratic system. Tracy's *Our Country, Our People and Theirs,*[13] the foreign policy booklets, Gunther's *Inside Europe,*[14] and Becker's *Modern History*[15] are used in addition to numerous pamphlets, articles and other books. The unit on "Standards of Living" includes the distribution of wealth, housing, crime, and the problems of labor and the farmer as its chief topics. Economics and problems

[5] Silone, Ignazio. *Bread and Wine.* Harper. 1937.
[6] Skariätina, Irina. *A World Can End.* Harrison Smith and Robert Haas. 1934.
[7] Bottome, Phyllis. *The Mortal Storm.* Little, Brown and Co. 1938.
[8] Paul, Elliot. *Life and Death of a Spanish Town.* Random House. 1937.
[9] Overstreet, Harry A. *About Ourselves.* Norton. 1927.
[10] Galsworthy, John. *The Forsyte Saga.* Scribner's. 1920.
[11] Maxwell, William. *They Came Like Swallows.* Harper. 1937.
[12] Keliher, Alice. *Life and Growth.* Appleton. 1938.
[13] Tracy, M. E. *Our Country, Our People and Theirs.* Macmillan. 1938.
[14] Gunther, John. *Inside Europe.* Harper. 1937.
[15] Becker, Carl. *Modern History.* Silver, Burdett and Co. 1935.

of democracy texts are used, together with University of Chicago primer pamphlets, public affairs pamphlets, and numerous other references.

This work is supplemented by material on the relationship of Quakerism to these problems, presented by the religious education instructor. Movies from the Carnegie Foundation, outside speakers, and student discussions make up the Friday afternoon forums attended by all sections. Informal and impromptu radio discussions over a local station on alternate Saturday mornings give the students public speaking experience and serve as a community service on the part of the school. Emphasis in all this work is placed on trips, interviews, and attendance at meetings on contemporary problems of all kinds outside the school. Some parts of class periods are devoted to reading. Class recitations are usually held in the form of discussion groups with the students arranged in semicircular fashion to stimulate an informal atmosphere.

In these many ways and by these varied approaches we are trying to instil in the voters of tomorrow that "divine discontent" of which the poet spoke. We are trying to train students who are conscious of the achievements of man, aware of the long and sacrificial struggles he has made to reach his present state of civilization, sensitive to the intricate problems of the present, and eager to contribute their part to the solution of some of these problems in the future.

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