CHANGES IN THE CURRICULUM AT THE SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL: SOCIAL FACTORS AND THE CURRICULUM

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In my analysis of the social factors which may affect, or have already influenced, the curriculum, I will draw your attention particularly to the Italian situation, both because I am more familiar with it and because I was able to obtain more up to date information on this subject. However, while considering the Italian scene, I have also focused my attention on other countries, like England and France, which are going through, or have already gone through, a similar development, though in a different social and cultural setting. I shall also refer to other countries, like Sweden and the Soviet Union, which have already solved some of the problems which in other countries slow down the pace of educational reform.

Educational forces isolated from social context would have not been able to bring about those changes in school structure, curriculum and teaching methods which they have advocated for many decades. It is, however, worth pointing out that many of the reforms which have taken place recently had been pointed out by educators as necessary instruments for social and educational progress. These demands for reform, on the other hand, were not a mere outcome of individual reflection, but sprang out of the objective process of society itself. Educators were the interpreters of this social growth and in several major instances were deeply involved in political and social struggles. Social scientists and reformers, like Marx and Dewey, were the forerunners of future changes. The unification of curriculum in order to avoid separation between humanistic, scientific, and technical studies, and the scientific method, introduced into all levels of education as a major factor for its democratization have been some of the most important points of contemporary educational reform.

The consideration of the school as part and parcel of society and the widening of the educational horizon so as to regard the study of changes occurring in the total social setting, family, industry, religion, politics, mass communication, etc., as an essential ingredient of pedagogical research is the most important lesson which our generation has learned.

These social forces however have not influenced education in a homogeneous way. Changes in school structure and curriculum have been the result of contrasting influences and of the eventual prevailing of some of these elements on others.

There is no doubt, for instance, that parents have always wished their children to have a brighter career and better life conditions than they themselves ever had. To this effect they wanted schools not to become impediments to the admittance of their children into the highest levels of the school up to university, if they possessed the needed qualities for this, quite independently
of their social and economic conditions. On the other hand it is also true that many parents clung tenaciously to their privileged socioeconomic status and opposed school reforms which they considered a menace to it.

In his description of the conflicting tendencies with regard to change in the direction of the common, or comprehensive, school in England, G. Baron remarked that “it disturbs middle-class parents, who feel that it matters intensely that their children should be educated among those of similar family background”. However, resistance to change came also from lower income groups. W. D. Halls observed in the French social groups that “the weakening of family ties has increased the doubts of working-class parents when their children are offered better educational facilities. They realize the prospects that better education offers, but fear not only that their children will have to go away from home, but will also grow away from them, acquire bourgeois values and despise their humble origin”. In agricultural areas — Dr. Halls added — the sending of a child away to school can often entail real financial losses. Teachers also faced school reforms in a rather ambivalent way. Many of them upheld those essential changes which progressive education and social thought had advocated for a long time. Others defended traditional school structure and curriculum. Pedagogical motives in several instances were propounded by them as a rationalization of a deep determination to defend their social status and social prestige.

Edmund J. King pointed out that in England for many years psychologists and teachers have been busy “finding” tests and educating children along the lines of alleged “natural” endowments which made necessary the division of pupils at 11 years of age into three groups according to their intellectual, technical, or practical types of mind. “Many of the schools and school populations docketed by these people long ago persist”, Dr. King remarked, “beset with teachers or politicians convinced of the old dispensation, but the merging and blending has been hazing the outline for a long time.”

Something similar has been going on in France since the Berthoin reform and the following ones during the past decade. Teachers have to a large extent resisted the trend towards unification in the junior high school. Impressive evidence has been gathered of the correlation existing between the low percentage of working-class children entering the guidance phase of the “premier cycle” and the teachers’ estimates. On the other hand, teachers’ estimates correlated with the highest percentage

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of children from the top socio-economic groups entering the guidance phase. 4

In Italy too the teachers’ attitude towards the new “scuola media” was divided. While many progressive teachers favoured the unification of different previously existing courses, many of those who had taught before in the academic courses were upset by the unification. A survey conducted in 1963-64 in several schools in Florence and in some other localities of Tuscany indicated that teachers were still unprepared to accept the new school structure and methods of teaching. “The common secondary school”, the author of this study pointed out, “parted from the traditional scheme of education for which teachers had been trained and brought a heavy blow to consolidated methods of teaching”. 5

This fact is only partly responsible for the school performance of many children. At the end of 1965-66, three years after the introduction of the “scuola media”, only about 50% of the age group obtained their diploma. Many other factors had bearings on this situation. The socio-economic conditions of families, particularly in the South and in agricultural areas, had a great influence. About 400,000 children of school age were already at work in 1962, thus violating the law which forbade child labour before 15. In the same year about 500,000 children from 11 to 14 were still in primary school classes. Since the “scuola media” were created and started to function, these figures have somewhat decreased. But full school attendance by all 2,400,000 children between 11 and 14 has not yet been obtained. Many children drop out of school during the three-year course. Allegiance of teachers to conventional middle class values, their scant sociological training and their following scarce awareness of the impact of the socio-economic milieu on children’s performance at school, the importance given by the syllabus to the mastering of linguistic skills which is made difficult by the widespread use of dialect, the postponed introduction of educational help to pupils in “after-school” hours, as foreseen by the 1962 law, have played an important role in perpetuating social class differences as primary factors of school success.

The contrasting tendencies which divided teachers and parents manifested themselves in a period characterized by a stupendous increase of enrolments in all types of schools. The “scholastic explosion” which took place in all countries during the past few decades was a major social factor for changes in school structures and curricula.

4. The study by A. Girard, “School Orientation and Social Environment” (Education Nationale, Dec. 5, 1963), quoted by W. D. Halls (p. 114) showed that in 1962 according to the teachers’ estimates 27%, of children from agricultural wage earners deserved to enter the guidance phase. The actual number of children who entered amounted to 27%. As for the top social groups, the teachers’ estimates were 71% for children of liberal professions and 78% for children from higher managerial and administrative groups. Actual entrance was respectively of 90% and 92%.

In Italy children enrolled in junior secondary schools increased from about 500,000 in 1946-47 to about 1,500,000 in 1961-62. Some 400,000 joined during the past 5 years. The greatest increase in secondary school enrolments occurred among social groups whose children had stayed out of school in previous years, i.e., among agricultural and industrial workers. Statistics published in 1963 concerning entrance to the "sixième classe" in France indicated that from 1953 to 1962 the percentage of children entering secondary schools from the lower income groups had increased by two or three times. The percentage of pupils from agricultural wage earners increased during that decade from 13% to 32%; that of pupils from industrial workers from 16% to 40%. Of course the already very high percentage of children of higher income groups who already attended secondary schools, underwent a much smaller increase.

The percentage of pupils coming from liberal professions and from "cadres supérieurs" increased, respectively, from 87% and 86% to 93% and 94%.

The "scholastic explosion" was the effect of economic and political events which took place after the war. The struggle against totalitarian states was a matter which, unlike the wars of previous periods, deeply involved the entire population. It resulted in a greater political maturity among all social groups. The idea of "participative democracy" has its roots in those events. The deeply felt need to share responsibility in the direction of political and social affairs gave impetus to the demand for education.

Economic progress made great strides in the post-war period and was a fundamental factor in helping people to satisfy their request for generalized instruction.

The school reforms which were brought about during the last decade were to a large extent the result of the pressures on governments by economic forces. Governments and economic agencies sponsored research in different countries on the role of the school with regard to the changing professional structures of society. The foreseen shortage of qualified manpower at various levels, brought about by the faster tempo of technological development, could only be avoided if the waste of youth talents caused by socio-economic factors, influencing selection for secondary school, had lost its impact in western countries.

Professor Ursula Springer brought evidence of the part played by "factual surveys and statistical projections on legislators and administrators to accept the costly and partly radical steps towards a more democratic distribution of educational opportunities and the general upgrading of compulsory schooling" in France, West-Germany and Italy in recent years.


However, the character of these reforms soon made clear that the prevailing influence of economic forces on changes in school structure and curriculum revealed contrasting aspects. It is a fact, that the demand for the unification of secondary education, which had become widespread among large groups of people in the western countries received strong and influential support, but at the same time it was diverted from its final aim by the same forces.

"Technological forecasting" sponsored by managerial groups and governments, had a rather narrow scope in the first stage of its development. Some of the most influential authors of the studies which were made in Italy after 1959 on the educational issues of technical advance recently declared that concentration of attention on economic factors and manpower needs to meet the demands of the changing productive techniques led to "grave distortions". The social side of the problem was neglected. Moreover, economic forecasts themselves soon appeared obsolete. They indicated that by 1975 young people who would obtain their leaving certificate from the "scuola media" would divide into four groups. The first group would be made up by those adolescents who would start working at 15. A second group would include those young people who ought to attend school for two more years until 16 and then be trained as skilled workers. A third group ought to remain at school until they had completed their secondary school education at 19. Middle-grade technicians should come out of this group. The fourth group should go to university after the end of secondary school, and it would provide top professional and managerial cadres. Three types of schools, similar to the existing ones would provide training for the last 3 groups at 2 levels, one of "premier cycle" from 14-16; the other of "second cycle" from 16 to 19.8

A revision of this "technological forecasting" by its authors after about a decade introduced two major changes into the previous picture. First of all, the two authors noted that the fast technical advance which was still taking place in many countries, including Italy, "made it difficult to distinguish between an essentially technical education and a general education in which the human sciences should have a great importance". Workers at all levels should receive a kind of education which had been until recently considered necessary only for specialists in higher posts of responsibility. Technological education should allow for all students to become familiar with the fundamentals of all sciences, including the social ones. Schools should mainly aim to foster the acquisition of creative intelligence by all students. In the fast approaching next period all workers would be asked to foresee, to co-ordinate, to judge, to decide, to be ready to meet changing conditions and to prepare new ones.

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A second point was also considered. Change was going on not only in working conditions but also in the entire society. The number of the non-working population was rapidly increasing in the industrial countries. Moreover, those who were at work had shorter daily working hours. Thus all people were getting a great amount of “free disposable time” (to use Marx’s expression). Under these circumstances the problem of offering everybody the opportunity of receiving a general liberal education was becoming most urgent. As a leader of an American Union remarked, “Labor shudders at leisure”.

A new kind of a humanistic education was needed for all, if the technical advance was to serve the purpose of the general progress and happiness of society. In the curriculum social sciences were to be placed on an equal footing with natural ones, and schools were to put all teaching on a research basis in order to stimulate intellectual independence and creative imagination. Moreover, schools should pay greater attention to the development of the social attitudes of all students. The ability to co-operate rather than to compete is of primary importance, if men have to learn how to master technological progress for their common advancement, rather than for their own destruction. The curriculum should therefore be concerned with the responsible participation of students in the organization of school programs and activities. It should be an intrinsic aspect of the major aim to help to promote in all students the formation of habits of criticism and divergent thinking, rather than the acceptance of ready-made ideas and submission to authority.

These critical remarks point out the need for school unification beyond the lower level of secondary education not only as far as school structures are concerned but also with regard to curriculum reform. Yet reforms carried out in the western countries after 1959 hardly brought out unification and democratization at lower levels.

I have already mentioned the persistent inequalities of the secondary selection process in France and England. Examining “long-term tendencies towards equalization”, Raymond Poignant expressed some doubts on the probability that “they would necessarily continue in the future” with regard to a substantial increase of percentage of children from peasant and industrial workers’ families entering the upper level of secondary schools.9

Dr. Springer quoted from French statistics for 1965-66 showing that “among the roughly 300,000 non-academic oriented six-graders (comprising half of the age-group) only 6.6% attended transitional classes. The vast majority remained in the final primary school classes ("Fin d’Etudes Primaires").” 10 Thus the future career of most French children was decided shortly after they ended primary school.

10. U. Springer, Recent Curriculum Developments, etc., p. 64, note 4.