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The Bank Street Thinkers

Foundational Knowledge to
Support our Roots and Wings



Social Studies and Geography

Lucy Sprague Mitchell
(1934)

As I look at the above title suggested as a subject for an article, it starts at least four elaborate thinking mechanisms whirling inside me. The word “social” starts one set of wheels; the word “study” another; “geography” starts a third, and the whirr is particularly loud and insistent because it runs into my teaching job. The fourth set is started by the implicit assumption that the thinking is to be applied to children and schools. I have no serene confidence that these four sets of thinking within me have made the subtle adjustments to one another which will insure the integrated total approach necessary for curriculum planning. I am convinced, however, that these four kinds of thinking must stop careering around the world or my head in the separated fashion of the four rings in a Barnum circus and must assume organic relations to one another for the good of all four. To make them do this will be my bold attempt in the few following pages. May I be forgiven, in view of the complexity and hugeness of the task, for beginning with a brief separate look at each of these four sets of thinking, though my main purpose is to consider their interrelations and to present them as an organic unit rather than as a circus? And may I be further forgiven for short-cutting to conclusions which I think most teachers in progressive schools have reached through their own experiences and which for them, can be assumed without presenting much evidence?

II. First, take, “studies.” What do we in progressive schools mean by a study? We mean, of course, getting into contact with factual data. But we mean, do we not, something considerably

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more than this acquisition of informational content? The word trails a method of work—a first-hand laboratory approach, an experimental attitude, a handling of sources, a discovery of significant relations within the data, a situation that permits genuine thinking on the part of the children of the type which characterizes investigators—not the type which characterizes antiquarians. Our studies are not always carried on by this method, because compromises are distressingly well known inside progressive schools, just as they are outside. But the laboratory approach is our aim. We carry it out where we are smart enough to lay hands on first-hand data and tools for studying them. And we fret over our compromises, our inadequacies, in our classroom techniques.

If the word “studies” were changed to “sciences,” as it often is, still another of our work attitudes would respond. Science deals with generalizations which are based upon many concrete observations. “Water seeks its own level.” “Living things need food.” “Congested cities depend upon outside workers for their food.” If every known, concrete instance behaves in a certain way, we call the behavior (animate or inanimate) a law. A law—whether natural, social, economic or what not—is a generalization based upon experiential evidence. To jump ahead to children for a moment, we shall not expect generalizations from them until they have accumulated enough experiential evidence to recognize the common element in the spread of data. Or, to say the same thing with an inverted emphasis, we shall try to supply them with experiences before we talk to them in generalizations. Thus the idea that scientific generalizations have a basis in experiential data affects our methods of study.

Our method—or rather the method we believe in—goes back to a conception of the learning process as an active, aggressive performance rather than a merely receptive one, based upon experience rather than upon report-about. The slogan “learning by doing” can be interpreted in very fine intellectual doing as well as in leg and finger doing. Discovering that lack of refrigeration in the Middle Ages led to spiced foods, and that to a search for trade routes to the spice countries, and that to an age of exploration and discoveries, may be “learning by doing” as genuinely as making a boat. Both situations involve a first-hand active attack.

Now if we naively apply our thinking about studies and the learning process to social studies, we are confronted with two questions. First, what first-hand social data are available? Second, what tools have we for their study?

This plunges us directly into the confusing second set of wheels started by the word “social.” The word connotes many conflicting things, often within the same individuals. Always however, there is a sense of group relations. We attach the word social to a wide variety of situations, and each one brings its special flavor, according to the thinking in terms of group relations with which it is tied up. Social adjustment, social worker, social institutions, social good, social studies. Sometimes it means the adjustment of the individual to other members within his group—the child to other members of the family, to other members of his school group, and so on. This personal adjustment within the group is never satisfactorily made by some individuals who remain what we call “self-centered.” Every child begins with himself, and others assume importance in relation to him. To think as a member of any group instead of as an individual indicates a tremendous social growth.

The boundary of loyalty is thus moved outward from the individual to “our set”—the group whose taboos and approvals we accept as ours. It may be that social growth means the extension of these boundaries of loyalties. Thus it comes about that the word social sometimes connotes relations of the individual to others within his set, sometimes connotes just the opposite—relations with “the other half,” “the other fellow,” the group that is unlike us. The connotation depends upon the relative emphasis we are placing upon individual or group thinking.

To regard the “unlike us” as inferior is following historical precedent. Barbarian meant outsider. The inferiority may not be the other fellow’s fault; nevertheless, he tends to be considered a damaged article and is often characterized as “poor.” I have known people and schools to whom “social thinking” or “social responsibility” seemed to mean giving financial support to the “poor Armenian” or some other damaged group remote enough not to impinge upon their personal lives. This is really only a variation of the “our set” psychology, with the smug addition that the superior being must be helpful to the inferior. The inferior is then expected to be grateful or humble, and if he is, is further stigmatized as “servile.” Witness the Negro and southern gentlefolk. If both groups identify themselves with the superior, we have the stage set for conflict with a sense of abuse and indignation on both sides. Witness so-called labor and capital.

What are the relations which bind human beings into groups which we wish the word social to connote in our social studies? What relations do we wish to dignify through studying them? Concerning what relations do we wish social source materials? For the moment let’s try to face this frankly, as adults, without a consideration of suitability for children’s study. And let us make our answers ideal and accept the necessary compromises afterwards. Let’s steer our Fords at a star—to put Emerson’s grand simile into modern terms.

Ideally (and modestly!) we should like to understand the groups of which we are members and all the groups of other fellows and all the interrelations between the groups! Understanding involves, does it not, an ability to project ourselves into the place of the other fellow and view the situation through his eyes? If this ideal is abhorrent to any of my readers, if they think of their group whether it be family, nation, race or what not, as the only group worthy of study, we might as well part company here. For any attempt to find a method by which we may experience the other fellow vicariously will not interest them. If we think over a few of the groups to which most of us belong, which recently have come in for special attention, we shall surely hit upon the family. Is there a mother in a progressive school who has not worried over her relations to her children? If there is, she had better keep it dark or the “helpful” school will seek her out, not to mention the psychoanalyst. Who understands the place of the family in the American culture of 1933? We turn eager eyes to history, for we have been told that we can learn from the experiences of the past. There, quite recently, we see the family—the husband the wage earner, the wife the home-maker—functioning in response to innumerable cultural needs, attending to the care and nurture of children, their education, preparation of their food and clothes—a cooperative unit sharing work and income with all the emotional loyalties which usually accompany interdependence. And now the outward shell is the same, but most of these functions have passed from the home and the family to outside in-

stitutions. But children are still born young and dependent even in the most modern of families. A situation queer enough to delight the most demanding psychoanalyst!

Another group to which all of us belong, somewhere along the scale from super-wealth to poverty is gathered together on the basis of income. Does the size of your income tax return also condition another loyalty? Are the other fellows above and below us in the economic scale slightly inferior—barbarians? Then there is the occupational group into which each is born; that is different from the mere family institution and different too from the income group. Was your father in the professional group, an artist, a farmer, in trade, and if so, was it wholesale or retail? Did the family fortunes go up and down with the stock market, with the weather which controlled the crop you were raising, with technological improvements? And were your sympathies with any change conditioned by the advantages or disadvantages to the occupational group to which you belonged? Is it still, though you may be out of that group now and in a job group of your own, bringing its own allegiances? School and college groups, local community groups, church and club groups—most of us have belonged to some or all of these close-corporation circles at some time, if not now. Still wider groups—nation, race, mankind—we belong to each. Which is most precious, commands most loyalty, most conditions your feeling of “our set” and the “poor” outsider, who is either to be pushed out as an unworthy companion, or to be helped as an unfortunate inferior, or envied as a lucky dog? How many of us are there who are not stuck in the clan thinking and clan interest of some group whose mores have become to us “the right way?”

Cutting across or including all these social groups which we are born into or take on in the course of our careers is one universal group. We all belong to the same biological species. Like it or not, we are all in the same boat when it comes to basic needs. We are all human beings, which economically puts us all into the class of consumers. The variations in specimens within the biological group (size, good bodies, beauty) may bring a sense of being different and superior. But our sympathies usually transcend these smaller group barriers, unless they are terrifically strong and identify us with the larger group. Few people fail to respond to the other fellow if he is in need of food or air or some other necessity. Think of the public emotion over three miners caught underground! We understand another’s basic needs, for they are the same as ours, but his racial group or his occupational or family group may be alien and “queer.”

What I glean from this complex of ideas concerning the problems of social studies is, first, that nobody can see the group he belongs to, with even approximate disinterestedness, while his experience is still bounded by that group, and before he has had sufficient experience with other and differing groups to see his own affiliations as a group phenomenon and the loyalties which come with the group as a part of the phenomenon. Recognition of an environmental pressure does not necessarily mean breaking the tie that has bound. But if the allegiance continues, it is on a voluntary, conscious basis rather than of the unconscious puppet type. Loyalties, the bases of which are understood and accepted, are far more precious than blind loyalties. And their emotional quality may even be enhanced if they are accepted with open eyes. Second, it seems that since our basic needs are shared, each can respond as a member of the group of consumers (of essentials), and the

relation of consumer to producer (of essentials) may become a common concern. Of course, in practical life, any individual may be, and usually is, more dominated by his membership in the family or income group than by his membership in the biological-consumer group. Nevertheless he retains the avenue to understanding the other fellow as regards the satisfaction of basic needs.

The geographic wheels are now beginning to whirr within me, particularly those associated with the word “human” geography. For human geography deals with the interrelations between the needs of human beings and the outside environment in which they must satisfy those needs. One half of human geography is what people do to modify the earth’s surface; the other half is what the phenomena of the earth’s surface do to condition men’s activities, most of which are concerned with their work. I like to use the expression human geography because it has not yet been spoiled by misuse or overuse as so many educational slogans have. Indeed, it is a comparatively new word. The thinking behind it is a part of a larger environmental approach which has recently affected history, economics, sociology, and even literature. The environmental approach appeared in biology (evolution) before it played a large part in the social studies or geography. It seems now to be increasingly important in the so-called social sciences.

III. At this point for myself at least, the four rings of the circus—social, studies, geography, children—begin to fade, and an organically related unit begins to take shape. It is not quite a curriculum yet - but it has many curriculum implications. With some experimentation I think it might be made the foundation of a curriculum in the social studies. Where there has been experimentation—in the younger years—it has proved a valid attack, though much still needs to be done to turn “an environmental approach” into concrete classroom techniques. But with the beginnings of adolescence the experimentation has grown faint-hearted and the thinking less organized.

Perhaps the fact that human beings are biologically one big group explains, in part, why work habits, by which basic and therefore shared needs are met, make such a universal appeal. The appeal seems to persist through the gamut of maturity levels and to transcend time and space. The first “not-me interests” that children manifest are in how somebody or something else gets fed, where he sleeps, and so on. A child’s slender experience with the other fellow’s habits makes him attach the work habits of his narrow personal environment indiscriminately to whatever he encounters. A city five-year-old, unused to horses, puts a toy horse to bed under blankets and feeds him steak and milk from a bottle. When a country ten-year-old who had never been in a real train tried to dramatize himself in a Pullman, he told the engineer to stop the train as it was “bed time for the passengers.” Early study of work habits are primarily an exploration of one’s personal environment as it is literally extended to a distance. There are very few self-contained units left in this world. Few children are brought up in families which depend only upon their own activities to supply their food, clothing, and shelter. The family work pattern has changed from self-contained to tied-in-ness with other workers. The same is true of community work patterns. Even rural communities are not self-contained in the old sense except in the few remaining pioneer fringes. And suburban and city communities are obviously dependent on distant workers for meeting their basic needs. With the new speed in transportation and communication, with the enormous development of roads of every

sort—highways, railways, waterways, and airways—the world has taken on a complicated interdependence of work patterns which is not usually realized even by adults whose own basic needs are being thus met. Consequently any genuine exploration by any children of how they get their food, how their houses function—which means water, light, heat, as well as food and beds—leads directly to other parts of the world and to other workers. And the way they are connected with the other parts and with other workers is literally through roads of some sort or through communication. Consequently if we begin with exploration of the way their own basic needs are met, for instance in their own kitchens, and follow backwards step by step, we have the foundation for a curriculum leading from the here to the distant, inherent in the present-day interdependence of work patterns. The other fellows - the long procession of workers from farm to kitchen (and this includes hundreds of specialized groups) - become an extension of themselves, and as such are interesting, particularly to young children who need the personal tie. Here, as always, exposure is not enough. The children need tools to help them organize their experiences. Though so vital part of curriculum planning, this tool aspect must be hurdled here. This is one of the necessary short cuts I referred to.

In the same way fairly young children (from seven on, I should think was the usual age) can best extend themselves to long-ago situations when those situations deal with the same basic needs that they themselves experience. The simplest excursion into the past is through the former work habits of the very environment which the children have explored around them. The English, the Dutch, the Indians of Manhattan, for instance, met their basic needs according to the work habits of their particular cultures, but utilizing or overcoming the same geographic forces at work in New York's metropolitan area in 1934. This is history; but again it is the environmental approach of human geography. Primitive man must be presented through human geography, and I believe that fact is largely responsible for his popularity in schools. The way he got his food and shelter, the way he protected himself, the way he developed one tool, one art after another, to help his native endowment in conquering his environment is all close to basic needs. The laboratory approach can be approximated in dealing with distant and past work habits if the conditioning geographic factors are given to the children, who then, for themselves, discover the relationships between the environment and men's use of it. I do not mean to suggest that no secondary sources can be used—that is no interpretation of the facts. But I do mean that factual evidence for the interpretation is necessary. All this ties up with methods, tools, images, and much which is vital to curriculum building but omitted here for lack of space.

Children get the work pattern aspects of primitive man long before they do the elaborate institutions of taboos, of marriage, of property, the myths, the attitudes towards the deity—in short the mores of primitive peoples. For here they have nothing with which to make comparisons. They are not yet outside of their family group; they are still bounded by the attitudes around them and consequently still take them unthinkingly as “right.” They are interested in the social mores (other than work habits) of alien peoples, but with the secure feeling that the contrast is as between barbarian and themselves. They like adventure—contact with the unknown. They can take the most extravagant flights—project themselves into every conceivable or inconceivable position

and fight their way through. But in their personal lives they still like the security of belonging to the familiar. At adolescence there comes an enlargement of interests. I do not think they outgrow the interest in work habits, any more than they outgrow their basic needs. But the emphasis shifts from *what* work habits to *what price* work habits? That is, the other fellow gets more significantly into the picture. When they begin to scrutinize their childhood group, when they begin emotionally to climb out of the family group and emotionally to ally themselves with other or larger environmental groups which have found more or less for themselves instead of accepting them as part of the protecting family or school circle, when the other fellow becomes terribly important and the long to see behind his eyes—then new environmental forces are at work and the curriculum must do something about it.

IV. But what? It is here that our curriculum experimentation has practically stopped. But need it? If we try to answer this question naively, continuing to draw upon what our experience has made us believe concerning “social” and “studies” and the learning process and applying these benefits to the maturity level which is characterized by an urge towards new groups, new loyalties, we may develop a method of studying our own and the other fellow’s mores. In the first place, we shall say that the curriculum should continue the laboratory method, which means it should furnish the children with as many first-hand experiences with the mores of other groups as possible; that it should supplement with vicarious experiences gained through source materials; that it should supply source materials relating to their own mores from the point of view of historic origin, present functioning, and comparative method; that the children should have more than a passive, absorbent role; that they should do something to their data.

Naive thinking with a vengeance! And yet has the naive joining together of these several kinds of thinking made only a disjunctive patch work? Is there not a genuine educational approach indicated? No curriculum could be launched until the following points had been considered: What first-hand experiences with other groups is possible in adolescence—possible from the point of view of maturity level rather than of practicality within our present educational systems—and how thoroughgoing can the experiences be?

A few stray experiments come to mind. I give them for what they may be worth. An increasing number of schools base their curriculum for younger children on trips in the environment, usually stressing work habits. I know of trips with older children which have included such environmental groups as churches of various religions—Protestant, Roman and Greek Catholic, Jewish, and so on—or sections of a city occupied by different nationalities. Many colleges are now planning environmental trips for their students. I have known city schools which took their children into the country for part of the school year, not for health but for educational purposes, and I have heard country schools discuss the desirability of reversing this process, even of swapping children and school plants. With young children this gives a contact with differing work habits. With older children it holds the possibility of joining—not merely of watching—other groups at work. Traveling school groups are not unknown. The ordinary tourist, of course, sees largely the “recreational industry” of each country. The experiments in International Living have joined American young people with

young people of similar age in the country visited and made a united traveling group who live part of the time with families. Some high schools, particularly abroad, have their children work in neighborhood factories or farms part of the time, not for vocational training but for enlargement of social experience. This combining of work and study has, of course, been tried in this country by Cincinnati University and Antioch College. On a less thoroughgoing experiential scale, there has been considerable experimentation in making contacts with other living groups through correspondence, exchange of local products, pictures, and the like.

And for vicarious experiences, what social source material have we, either genuine sources or secondary sources? Museums and exhibits and pictures—each brings us a type of source material that is pretty generally used by progressive schools. The much-condemned movie makes a real contribution through its films of other lands and other peoples. But these, valuable as they are, are very small entering wedges into the understanding of current mores, either our own or the other fellow's. Of written sources, what is there? Very little that is not wrapped up in technical language or buried deep under interpretations. But there is enough to suggest possible lines. There are historic sources like Scribner's *Original Narratives*. There are original studies made by the city planning groups, or like *Middletown* by the Lynds, *The Arctic Village* by Robert Marshall, or the case studies by Brunhes in his *Human Geography*. The recent large crop of regional novels indicates the increasing interest in the environmental approach but can hardly be classed as source material. There are ethnological studies like *Coming of Age in Samoa* by Margaret Mead and race conflicts studies like Mrs. Millin's *South Africans*. There are budget studies of expenditures for different-sized incomes and social statistics such as the census report. There are general studies of mores like Sumner's *Folkways* and Frazer's *Golden Bough*, which give historic source material. But these are not brought down to date. Could they be? President Hoover's Research Committee on *Recent Social Trends* took current history into account. Could the institutions under which our present-day culture functions—family, marriage, divorce, property, race discrimination, church, school, art, law, the state, to mention a few of the most important—could these institutions be better understood if we knew their historic origins? Veblen gave most of us a jolt in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*. Perhaps we, too, might discover some historic lags in our institutions! And if to the historic, we added the comparative method—these same institutions as they function in differing groups—we might discover some clan-thinking in ourselves or our set!

The situation is not easy for the adult nowadays and worse still for children. There seems to be little that one could put into the hands of high school children tomorrow. But much might be dug out, assembled, selected, organized, even written, if there were a demand. Such a demand would have to come from the schools.

What tools have we for studying relationship if we could command sufficient sources? This important curriculum question cannot be touched here. Suffice it to say that the raw data are not enough in social studies, any more than they are elsewhere. They must be organized—and that is something else again.

Though the pioneer fringes on the globe are shrinking, the pioneer fringes within the curricu-

lum are expanding. Pioneers, if they are to survive, need more than an empty country to move into. They need to explore the new territory for strategic situations, for natural resources; they need tools for overcoming obstacles. They need to take the old and adapt it to the new. Educational pioneers need the same. Good luck to those who are fortunate enough to have the time and opportunity and courage to explore the uncharted country of social education and show us the way from the slavery of clan-thinking to the promised land where we shall understand the other fellow!