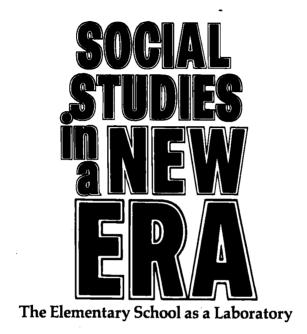


THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AS A LABORATORY

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LONGMAN
NEW YORK AND LONDON

### SOCIAL STUDIES IN A NEW ERA The Elementary School as a Laboratory

Longman Inc., New York Associated companies, branches, and representatives throughout the world.

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Developmental Editor: Nicole Benevento

Editorial and Design Supervisor: Linda Salmonson

Design: Angela Foote

Manufacturing and Production Supervisor: Louis Gaber

Composition: Maryland Linotype Composition Co.

Printing and Binding: The Maple Press

### Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Massialas, Byron G 1929-Social studies in a new era.

Total States In a ner

Includes index.

Social sciences—Study and teaching (Elementary)
 United States.
 Group work in education.

I. Hurst, Joseph B., 1943— joint author.
Title.

M365 372.8′3′044

77–17716

15br v-582-28043-5

Manufactured in the United States of America

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

"Apple Tree," "Testing Ideas—Intermediate," and "Come On You Guys, Don't," from *Individuals and Groups*—Project Books 3 and 5 / Social Science Laboratory Units by Ronald Lippitt, Robert Fox, and Lucille Schiable. © 1969, Science Research Associates, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

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# **PREFACE**

about the need to combine theory and practice, book learning and real-life experience in our schools. Texts have been written on the subject, most of them favoring this approach and giving the philosophical and psychological bases for it. Rarely, however, has a text attempted to go beyond arguments and into the actual operation of a program of learning based on the school as a laboratory. This book seeks to do exactly this.

The "school-as-lab" approach assumes that the school provides a variety of real-life experiences for children and youth, experiences that need to be recognized and capitalized upon by educators. When formal

learning relates to, or reinforces, these experiences, it is useful and should be included in the program. When formal learning is not relevant to the world of the child, it should be abandoned or revised. Learning merely for the sake of learning is no longer tenable in a world characterized by rapid social change, a geometric increase of knowledge, and the creation of a vast number of alternatives that force individuals to make decisions frequently and effectively. Individuals who do not learn to make these decisions and to choose reflectively from all the alternatives available to them will not be able to meet the challenges of their environment and find personal satisfaction and self-fulfillment.

The book draws upon the experiences of the authors and of teachers in elementary schools. It seeks to provide elementary teachers with the concepts and skills necessary for helping children and youth become effective decision makers. In developing decision-making skills, the entire school is looked upon as a laboratory that provides natural settings for real-life experiences. Three areas of skills are developed in depth—cognitive, affective, and participatory. These skills are explained and illustrated in such a way that theoretical knowledge and practical applications are brought together to make for a powerful classroom environment.

The book operates on the major assumption that school is not preparation for life, but life itself. Therefore, the main task of the teacher is to utilize those settings where decisions are made and build into them opportunities for learning how to resolve crucial personal, school, and community issues. In such an environment children participate in making decisions on matters that affect them directly—grades, discipline, classroom seating arrangements, hall passes, waiting in the cafeteria line, selecting a class representative or faculty sponsor, working out assignments, extra class activities, and so forth. Once the decision makers in the school are identified, children learn how to make their proposals to them, how to back these proposals with facts, how to mobilize "grassroots" support, how to bargain and negotiate, how to vote, and how to develop binding rules. As children engage in this process, case studies from the larger society are utilized so that children can understand the similarities and differences in decision making at various levels-in the school, the community, the nation, and the world. While decisionmaking skills are exercised, there is constant preoccupation with moral and ethical questions. Students learn that for any decision or course of action taken, they should be in a position to respond to: Is it right? Does it help others? Does it provide for justice? In this way the school emerges as an agent that helps children to become skilled decision makers and at the same time to develop their own moral standards, which they can defend to others and which guide their individual and social actions.

The field and experimental work that has gone into this book has been extremely rewarding and challenging. In this enterprise we need to acknowledge the assistance of Barbara Hurst, Kent State University, who has worked with us on various aspects of this program. Also, thanks are due to Mary Sugrue Murphy of Phoenix, Arizona, and Jack Zevin of Queens College for letting us use exemplary instructional material we have developed in collaboration. To Professor Anna Ochoa, a former colleague now at Indiana University, who has read the manuscript and has given us constructive criticism, we owe a great deal for

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sharpening the focus of the book. To Nicole Benevento of Longman Inc., we extend our thanks for her continuous encouragement and support in getting things done.

Needless to say, while acknowledging our indebtedness to our colleagues, we alone are to be blamed for any shortcomings in the book.

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# 1

# THE FRAMEWORK

he pedagogy presented in this book is based on the assumption that the United States and other societies increasingly will be faced with a condition that Alvin Toffler, a futurist, calls "overchoice." This is simply a state in which individuals have such a vast number of alternatives to choose from that they are virtually paralyzed by the superabundance. In order to deal effectively with overchoice, Toffler argues, individuals need to have coping skills, that is, skills that will enable them to evaluate their world reflectively and select alternatives for action that will bring individual happiness, satisfaction, and self-fulfillment. In this context the aim of schooling in

the 1980s and '90s will be to enable the individual to develop a sense of control over his or her environment, this to be done in large measure through knowledge, understanding, participatory activity, and the development of a set of defensible values.

In the new pedagogy, not merely "learning how to learn" is stressed; action-learning also becomes a key element in the education of the young. Toffler asks that action-learning become a dominant mode of instruction for everyone—old and young. He calls for participation in decisions and for a school setting that "creates opportunities for students to move from the field back to the classroom . . . for probing explora-

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tion of the personal and public values that underlie their successes and failures. . . . The combination of action-learning with academic work, and both of these with a future orientation . . . helps close the gap between change occurring 'out there' and change occurring within the individual, so that learners no longer regard the world as divorced from themselves, and themselves as immune to (and perhaps incapable of) change."

Research indicates that the most crucial ages for the socialization of a person are the years between three and thirteen.<sup>2</sup> During these years individuals form their basic orientations toward their world and develop the necessary skills to cope with their environment. Since this is so, children in this age group should not learn inquiry and problem-solving skills in the abstract but should be taught in settings in which these skills are practiced. Proper settings would allow the opportunity to participate in and make decisions about matters that concern both the children and the persons with whom they must interact.

### INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS

How will the school help children understand their environment and acquire the skills necessary for coping effectively with their world? As we know, the school is only one of the socialization agents—along with the family, the peer group, the church, and other community agencies. In our discussion we will assume that, for the most part, these agents operate in harmony with one another, with the school taking the initiative by keeping in close contact with these other agents—apprising them of its work, involving them in their projects, offering services and expertise and the like. What, then, are the instructional goals that the school should strive to accomplish?

Specifically, the school should provide instructional programs that enable children—

- 1. to understand the key political, social, economic, and ecological issues in their world;
- to relate macro issues to micro concerns—to relate, for example, world or national problems to individual or school problems and thus acquire "multilevel understanding";
- 3. to participate directly in decisions affecting them;

<sup>1.</sup> Alvin Toffler, ed., Learning for Tomorrow (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 18.

<sup>2.</sup> Robert D. Hess and Judith V. Torney, The Development of Political Attitudes in Children (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

- 4. to apply ethical norms, both to the substance of decision making and the procedures used in making decisions;
- 5. to develop a sense of efficacy and internal control.

To accomplish these goals the entire school must become a laboratory for the understanding of issues and participation in decision making. The school-as-lab approach is based on the idea that the whole school—the classroom, the gym, the cafeteria, the "front office"—provides natural situations that can be used to involve students directly in problem solving and decision making. The application of this approach to the daily activities of students in school makes learning meaningful, for it relates learning to the real problems that confront students.

### THE SCHOOL AS A POLITICAL SYSTEM

We may think of society as comprised of a number of social and biological systems, each system dealing with certain decisions or issues. For example, the economic system focuses on economic decisions, the political system on political issues, and so forth. Decisions may address such basic concerns as how scarce resources are allocated (economic), how binding rules are made (political), how individuals or groups relate to one another (social), or how people and other living beings are distributed over space and relate to their environment (ecological). Other systems or subsystems exist, but for our purposes, we emphasize the four systems—economic, political, social, and ecological—stated above. These systems interact; but for purposes of study, they also can be illustrated separately. Two diagrams may show how systems function and how they interrelate.

Figure 1.1 presents an input/output flow model of a political system. Easton considers the political system to have two general types of environments, the intrasocietal environment and the extrasocietal environment. The intrasocietal environment, the environment within a society, includes the ecological, biological, personality, social, cultural, economic, demographic, and other systems or subsystems. The political system is part of the intrasocietal environment and is in constant interaction with the other systems. The extrasocietal environment, or the international society, includes "all those systems that lie outside the given society itself." In addition to the political system, the extrasocietal environment includes all the other systems—ecological, social, cultural, and so on. What separates the political system from the other systems (in both national and international environments) are (1) the ability of the

<sup>3.</sup> David Easton, A Framework for Political Analysis (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965).

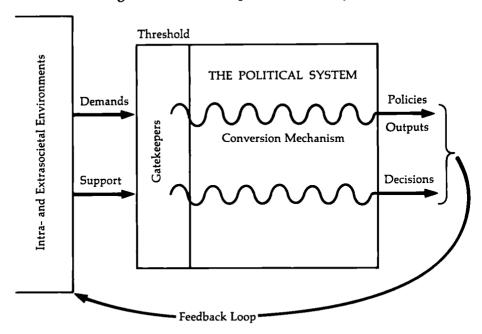


Figure 1.1. The Concept of a Political System

political system to make authoritative allocations of resources and (2) a situation in which the authority to do so is accepted as binding and legitimate. In other words, the political system is functioning when it can make authoritative decisions about the allocation of resources and these decisions are accepted. The political system is the order-maintaining system of a society. Legitimacy exists when people in a society recognize the rule of authority and accord the government respect and support. Legitimacy, the extent to which people believe in the appropriateness of the political system and accept it, may exist as a result of the activities of a small group of citizens who faithfully support the system and hold the main instruments of power. As long as support for the system is accorded, the legitimacy of the system persists.

The authorities of a system are given the power to process demands from the citizens and to either satisfy these demands or postpone satisfaction until more pressing demands are met. Demands may involve allocation of specific goods and services, regulation of behavior, participation in decisions, communication of important information, and so forth. The process by which demands are made by a group of citizens is referred to as *interest articulation*. Whenever teachers or parents or

students organize and make certain demands of the school authorities, they engage in interest articulation. The conversion process from demands to policies is called *interest aggregation*. If the political system is perceived as a flow model (as the input/output mode in figure 1.1), political demands enter the threshold of the system, their flow is regulated by the authorities or the important decision makers (the gate-keepers), and they leave the system in the form of policies, laws, regulations, or other binding decisions (simply known as political outputs). These decisions are made by a governmental agency, be it a legislative assembly of the parliamentary variety or a clan council. The form of output may be specific allocation of national resources, government services, or whatever.

In addition to demands from the citizenry relating to the policies or goals of the system, inputs of support enable a political system to maintain itself and carry out its objectives (see figure 1.1). The payment of taxes and military service are examples of material support for the system. Other evidences of support are obedience to laws and government regulations, voting, discussing politics, participatory political acts, and deference given to national and government symbols. Political elites try constantly to accommodate demands with support and to regulate their flow through the various political channels. The system, in processing demands and supports, performs regulative, extractive, distributive, and responsive functions. In totalitarian regimes the regulative and extractive capabilities of the political system stand out; totalitarian systems have a strong distributive capability and can reallocate goods and services from one group in the society to another. Democracies have a strong responsive capability; they tend to emphasize the input of demands from the citizens, and they seem to be quite sensitive to demands from the electorate.5

Figure 1.2 shows how the educational system interacts with other systems. The important thing to observe here is that education does not function in a vacuum. Educational decisions are influenced by agencies outside the educational system. In the same manner, all the agencies in the diagram—religious, business, political, and so on—are influenced by decisions made within the educational system.

In this book we consider the school to be a microsociety having its own organization and system-maintenance mechanisms. Patterned after Easton's models, the school can be conceptualized as a political, social, economic, ecological, or biological system or subsystem. Because this book emphasizes decision making and citizenship education, we shall

<sup>5.</sup> Gabriel A. Almond and C. Bingham Powell, Jr., Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966), pp. 190-212.