

The Socialization Process and Its Impact on Children and Learning

By Dr. Ralph G. Perrino

Family, school, peers, mass media, public opinion, work, volunteer groups, and religion/spirituality each play a major role in the socialization and, ultimately, the education process. Each of us proceeds through life in a manner we often believe is under our immediate control and influence. It seems logical that the actions we take and the impact of those actions is based upon a series of logical, rational, decisions selected and filtered by choice, not chance. Although this seems a reasonable manner in which to assess one's lot in life, it is far from reality, particularly in the area of education. The sociological perspective tells us otherwise.

One of the most dramatic impacts on a child's education is that of the socialization process. Forces removed from our immediate decision-making process guide us all. Through the process of socialization, the hidden hand of social forces often beyond our control guides our lives. The major agents of socialization – family, school, peers, mass media, public opinion, work, volunteer groups and religion/spirituality – exert external pressure on each of us. As Charles Horton Cooley has pointed out, the evolution of "self" (the "Looking-Glass Self") emerges from this mix of social forces. George Herbert Mead furthered this idea by developing the "I"/"Me" dichotomy – the acting or unsocialized self and the socialized self, the self based on standards we learn from interaction with others. This is particularly true during the formative years from kindergarten through high school, but can also take place well into the elderly years. The impact of these forces can vary dramatically from person to person, depending on their life circumstances and social class status. The consequences can be life altering and severe.

The idea that each child enters school with the same opportunities that foster success is not a valid assumption. In theory, most accept this idea. In fact, many external forces have a profound impact on children and teens. Among these are:

- The family from which ascribed status is derived
- Attendance at a public school or an exclusive, elite private school
- The composition of peer groups
- Exposure to mass culture and the media
- The impact of work and career
- Involvement in voluntary groups
- Religious affiliation/spirituality

The socialization process, by definition, creates a system that is inherently unequal by most empirical measures of equality. This inequality has both short-term and long-term implications for the academic success of children. Given an open-class economic system that offers equality of opportunity, but in practice fosters disparities between social classes, the questions that must be asked are: How does the education system provide the level playing field society desires? What are the roles of school as well as the other agents of socialization in ensuring equal opportunity for all children from the elementary through college years? How can the socialization process help to address the long-standing "achievement gap" that has confronted public school systems throughout America for decades?

As the primary agent of socialization and the first "educator," the family, plays an essential role in the transmission of the fundamental values that encourage and nurture learning in a young child. There is strong indication that children from homes in which both parents have earned college degrees have a significantly higher probability of academic success as well as personal and professional success. The opposite is also true. Children from homes in which parents do not possess a college education will have a more difficult time achieving academic, personal, and professional success. The hand of the socialization process is at work here. The disparity inherent in this environment demonstrates the importance of the family and its role as the primary transmitter of values. The institution of the family in America is the primary purveyor of education as a core value regardless of educational background. For some, it comes by way of birth and privilege. For others, it comes by way of perseverance, hard work, and persistence in the face of adverse economic factors. Regardless, the possibility of academic success is less without the family as a guiding force.

Another major agent of socialization is school. It is the primary transmitter of information and knowledge. It has also been called upon to assume many of the functions of the family. School systems have assumed other roles and responsibilities that historically had been the domain of the family. Areas such as providing basic needs (breakfast, lunch and, in some instances, dinner), before and after-school programs with children spending most of their waking hours in the care of school personnel rather than parents, and teaching morals and values have become a responsibility of school systems. This is a dramatic shift in the respective roles of the family as the primary agent of socialization and schools whose historic role had been to educate. There has been a blurring and, in some instances, an abdication of the role of the family in the socialization process.

Few parents would deny the increasing influence of peers in the lives of children and young adults. Although peers can be a positive force manifested in sports, scouting, faith groups, and other positive influences, they are often a negative influence. The most detrimental manifestations of this are drug and alcohol use, premature teen sexual activity, and other socially proscribed behaviors. It is also at this time in a middle school child's life that peer influences develop in the area of academic achievement. Being ostracized and chastised for "being smart" is a common burden placed on otherwise high-achieving students, particularly minority students. At this point in a student's socialization process teachers, parents, and other adult role models play a vital role.

Mass media also has an immense impact on young minds. With the advent of the Internet, television now has a partner in the role of visual stimulant of young minds. The culture portrayed by the mass media emphasizes glamour, sexual satisfaction and promiscuity, comedic vulgarity, violence, and immediate gratification of needs. How does a parent cope with the influences of the mass media as an agent of socialization that minimizes the learning process and glorifies the values of instant gratification? Again, the role of adults and the family in a child's life in this environment takes on increased importance.

The role of religion and spirituality in the lives of children and young adults has been minimized by society in recent years. This trend has, along with the previously mentioned influences of peers and the mass media, the potential to send teens astray. The moral compass that religion and spirituality provide cannot be downplayed in today's fast-paced, consumer-driven society. Religion continues to play a role in identity formation. The role of religion as an agent of socialization cannot be ignored. It is a primary transmitter of our core personal and societal values. The founding documents of America contain strong reference to the values of equality, freedom, fairness, and egalitarianism – all fundamental precepts of most religions. Leaders such as Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln and others have called upon spiritual values and teachings to awaken the moral sensibilities of the nation throughout our history. Without the socializing influences of religion, the powerful external forces faced by teens – drugs, a sexualized culture, violence, negative peer pressures, and other dysfunctional influences - become more influential. Parents need to be aware of the stabilizing influences of religion in a child's life and realize that religion is not so much a polarizing issue as it is an important element of the socialization process.

As a child matures through the socialization process, work and volunteer groups become important elements of their evolution of "self." Through part-

time employment, young adults begin the process of learning the expectations of other adults outside the context of family and school. The importance of hard work, earning an income, and saving for the future are all values brought to light in a work environment.

Volunteer groups such as scouting, faith-based groups, sports, and school clubs can also play a role in the socialization process by placing teens in positive peer environments. Mead's "Me" is further developed in these environments.

The socialization process has an enormous impact on children and teens in the context of the learning process. Family, school, peers, mass media, religion, work, and volunteer groups each play a role in the collective process we term education. Parents must recognize that each of these agents of socialization maximize the role of education in our children's lives. Anything less is an abdication of our responsibility as adult role models for our children and for future generations.

Dr. Ralph G. Perrino