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The Impact of Urbanisation on Aspects of Schooling

Whether it be an allusion to an incipient township or to a modern city like Singapore, one simple statement may be used to define both – they draw people. No single inducing factor may be pinpointed as being responsible for attracting people to certain locations in large numbers. Sometimes the town or city grows by virtue of its position; sometimes groups aggregate to share a common destiny because of common purpose.

“The rise of cities was predominantly a social process, an expression more of changes in man’s interaction with his fellows than in his interaction with his environs”.⁽¹⁾

So for their various personal reasons, the people come, not only from the immediate surrounding districts, but also from other places more remote. The city is perceived as offering answers to seekers of opportunity; it is the seat of government and political decision-making, the centre of organised services, the hub of cultural activities. Its cloak of anonymity offers warmth and comfort until such time as those who have not successfully achieved are spewed up as flotsam and jetsam on the tide of social maladjustment and failure. Those who come with skills tend to settle in quickly, as they can easily avail themselves of one of a range of occupational choices, other pushed into the city by circumstance, disillusioned by the lack of adequate response from the land tilled for years by their forebears, unskilled and unschooled, run the risk of being left behind in the competitive struggle of city life. As more and more people become city dwellers, the pace of urbanisation quickens.

Singapore is a case in point. From a bare half a million population before World War II, the population, in absolute figures, stands now at 2.07 millions. In the years between 1957 and 1966, it was possible to identify, besides the rate of natural increase, an annual influx of 0.2 to 0.3 per cent⁽²⁾ consisting of groups of persons from outside – mainly Chinese. In absolute terms again, this meant that an average of some 40,000 to 45,000 people came in to settle each year of that decade.

(1) Broom L & Selznick P., Sociology, Harper & Row Inc., 1963, p. 591.

(2) You Poh Seng, The Population of Singapore, 1966, Econ. Research Centre, University of Singapore, Reprint Monograph Series, No. 10, p.61.

Though there was a brief phase after 1966 when such an inflow was subjected to somewhat stricter control, the need for skilled labour in the most recent years after 1969 has tended to promote a selective immigration of those who show promise of ability to play a significance role in a rapidly industrialising society with a rising economy.

A discussion of urbanisation must draw attention to certain phenomena associated with cities:

Firstly, cities are crowded places.

The rate of natural increase enhanced by a regular inflow of persons from outside has necessitated changed ways of living. Many more people are housed in flats in large apartment blocks than a generation ago. This is characteristics of cities everywhere. Because lifestyles have to change with these changes, the extended family system has to give way to the nuclear family unit. To the older generation in the Asian context, this is hard to take. A new responsibility, the care of the aged, then, becomes a state welfare concern. In the life-long education context, education for growing old is needed.

On the other hand, for children in the family the authority figure is becoming more difficult to identify. Where both parents go to work because of opportunities offered through successful industrialisation, the children have neither the adult authority from the extended family nor the guidance of the parents. They receive neither the traditional control nor are they able to set up a frame of reference for themselves by internalising the values of more immediate adults. Under the circumstances, they look increasingly to their own peers for direction.

While anonymity is always present, privacy has become a luxury. Conflicts and tensions of all kinds beset the city dweller. The attempt to diffuse opportunity for all makes the competition for opportunity ever keener, since fact does not catch up fast enough with ideal. The tendency is for the individual to overextend himself emotionally, physically and mentally.

The stresses of office and the pace of work produce such psychosomatic disorders as the "executive" ulcer or the coronary thrombosis. Mental neuroses are more common among urbanites living in an industrialising society and these will certainly multiply as the society moves into more complex phases of development.

Also, more and more working parents abdicate their responsibility for the well-being of their children to the school. Children left too much to themselves often become addicted to T.V. viewing. Medical literature, interestingly enough, has somewhat hesitatingly drawn attention to the effects of T.V. viewing on the physique of children. They have been known to develop T.V. jaws, T.V. elbows and the like through assuming careless postures for long periods of time before the T.V. screen, for example, cupping jaws in hands while lying on their stomachs.

Density problems not only give rise to human problems. They affect the deployment of physical space. Green spaces as city lungs were often eased out of central areas, where densities are highest, to make room for office buildings which are considered more desirable

Space shortage also affects the schools. Writing of the 'Urban Revolution' a few years ago, Quan⁽³⁾ had this to say of Singapore:

"On some 45 acres only there are 52 schools located within the Central Area, at an average of 0.9 acre per school. They give instruction to some 45,000 pupils. The Central Area is also an educational zone where about 1/10 of the total school enrolment of the Republic matriculates, generally under very crowded conditions. Average pupil densities per double-session school are about 500 pupils per acre ..."

Population shifts within the city have changed the densities of some areas and noticeably the Central, but in land-hungry Singapore such have merely meant increased densities in new townships like Queenstown and Toa Payoh.

Secondly, cities are places of ethnic heterogeneity and cultural diversity.

Because of the many peoples of diverse origins who migrate to a city, there is brought with them a wide range of variation with respect to attitudes to work and leisure, to ways of bringing up a family, to morals and religious beliefs. Those who share the same values and background tend to gravitate to one another and follow the same pursuits.

(3) Quan, H. "The Urban Revolution" in *Intisari*, Vol III, No. 1, p. 32 (1966)

Thus in Singapore, the Foochow immigrants used to be coffee-shop owners and tailors; Hainanese were generally cooks and houseboys; Hokkien people were, in the main, hawkers and modest provision shopkeepers. These are intra-ethnic differences.

Inter-ethnic differences are even greater and extend beyond the sphere of specialised occupations. Diversity can be either a potential source of creative innovation (that is, if intergroup sharing and cross-fertilisation of ideas are perceived as desirable for the common good), or, it can generate increasing strife and jealousy between disparate groups that continue to preserve their separate ways with deliberate intent.

Thirdly, cities are impersonal.

Amidst the diversity of peoples in the city, many experience a loss in significant relationships with other people. Throughout a day, the urbanite meets others on casual acquaintance and sometimes without any social interaction at all.

The noise, the crowdedness, the kaleidoscopic and changing influences about him develop in him a psychological immunity to their stimuli. He becomes gradually desensitised, learn to hide his feelings and to manipulate situations to his own ends. He gets used to a routine of predictable behaviour like everyone else about him. Hence, in his daily vocabulary, two words, "appointment" and "schedule" appear with regular frequency. His consciousness is time-based. Were the time base to be removed, confusion among urbanites would be just as predictable as their normal behaviour controlled by the clock. Where a highly-organised bureaucracy exists, the depersonalisation is even more complete.

There is one lurking danger inherent in this rational, efficient yet impersonal society, namely, the possible incidence of social apathy and alienation, antipathic to the development of a collective awareness of common values and common aims.

Fourthly, while the rise of modern cities is generally associated with industrialisation and technological progress, the rate of urbanisation does not necessarily correlate with that of industrialisation. In many a city, the process of urban decay may be initiated by accelerating urbanisation where the concomitant support of accelerating industrialisation is absent.

The material comforts of urban life brought about by technological development are to be coveted – electricity, piped water, mass media such as books, radio and television. But, where the means for multiplying

material resources are lacking owing to the absence of adequate human resource potential, the city fails to meet the expectations of its people. Then it happens that more people are idle than can be used; economic returns for the individual are poor; slums and ghettos flourish. Ultimately, the city becomes a dung heap of human misery, cancer-like in its growth capacity, but disappointing in its promise.

Finally, urbanism does not always attend urbanisation.

The latter is a process of agglomeration; the former is an awareness of what this implies. We have often been reminded in Singapore of our responsibilities as citizens, of the need to keep the city clean, or to conserve water or to be responsive to change, and of the importance of identifying, corporately and individually, life styles and values that will continue to make our city viable as a cultural and industrial centre. There have been frequent references too to those who have come into our midst, whose actions countervail our efforts to build a tight-knit and disciplined society.

Urbanism, then, cannot be taken for granted. It has to be assiduously and deliberately cultivated and promoted in our people from their earliest school days.

Urbanisation and Schooling

Because urbanisation affects people, it necessarily affects schools where rising generations are being prepared to live and work in the city where they are born.

Physical structure of schools

Passing allusion already has been made to the scarcity of land for schools. This entails a change of thinking with respect to the physical nature and location of the school. This in its turn requires a re-examination of the role of the school in urban society.

Urbanisation brings with it the benefits of education as a free social service – at least through primary school for most countries. This being the case, schools have to cater to-day to many more children than they did before. Enrolments in the case of some Singapore primary schools reach a figure of almost 2,000 and for secondary schools, 2,800 to 3,000.

The new needs have brought two important considerations to the fore – economy in space utilisation, while not sacrificing important objectives in the curriculum, and flexibility in space development. Thus

the tendency is towards the building of multipurpose laboratories and play areas; and the centralisation of special facilities in special rooms around which flexible classrooms are disposed for ease of access and student movement. These last are flexible in the sense that, at any given moment, they may be converted for small-group or large-group instruction.

In one sense, metaphorically speaking, the modern school is almost on the doorstep of the home. This is because parents tend more and more to leave the business of counselling and discipline of their children to the teachers. Children in cities often have nowhere to go after school is over for the day. Since the only playground available to them may be just that in the school, it seems appropriate that the school in the city should remain open the whole day so that children may return to it to engage in self-study and to play.

A study⁽⁴⁾ made by two University of Singapore students on a pupil sample drawn from a housing estate secondary school carried these statements among others in the conclusion:

“The students’ study habits were generally found to be good. This is unexpected in view of their low achievement in academic work when compared to other students in the better performing schools.

Their low academic performances can generally be attributed to factors which are prevalent in the housing estate: frequent noise interruption, low occupation of main wage earner, low family income, low parental education, large family size ...”.

These findings bring to view the crowded nature of most homes in high-rise housing estates and the lack of supportive learning resources for young pupils. The open school or the open classroom, in the sense that its facilities, when not required for formal demands, are placed at the disposal of those who need them, will help much to ameliorate conditions of study for those pupils who suffer from environmental disadvantage.

(4) Miao S. & Kong B., Academic Achievement, School Adjustment & Delinquency Proneness in a Housing Estate School, unpublished academic exercise, Dept. of Sociology, University of Singapore, February, 1971.

Objectives and content of urban education

Where a slow rate of modernisation and industrialisation exists, urbanisation merely highlights the futility brought on by a general freeze in the minds of man, in authority-flow, in capital-flow, in people-flow. Mentally, there is a lag in psychic mobility which lacks appreciation of the need to improve age-old bureaucratic procedures and organisational methods. As pointed out above, urban living makes for uncertain direction with respect to value acceptance. Less and less money becomes available as economic growth rates are outstripped by those of population. Social mobility is circumscribed by both lack of opportunity and lag in psychic mobility.

If, further, the country subscribes to an egalitarian philosophy with respect to educational opportunity, urbanisation merely helps to force on the school the role of a factory house for the production of "educated" unemployables. This obtains already in several countries around the world and the situation is aggravated by the fact that schools have not always been quick to realise that their curriculum and objectives may have become anachronistic vis-à-vis new needs. An examination of these would then be an urgent exercise to bring education into relevance with new needs.

Riesman⁽⁵⁾ has established a thesis that there is reasonable evidence from demography that population growth in Western and Western-type societies follows the S-type development. The bottom horizontal of the S then represents a situation where the birth and mortality rates generally balance out, life expectancy is low and generation turnover, high. Such a society is termed a "high-growth potential" society in terms of the population variable, for should new knowledge of health and sanitation be applied to its way of life, a "population explosion" would result. Characteristically of this society, conformity is assured by a tradition-orientation on the part of its people

The urban phase just described above is somewhat analogous to the "high-growth potential" population phase. The city's services are superior to those in rural areas. More survive, even if for a more prolonged period of misery than previous experiences on the land entailed.

(5) Riesman, D. et al, The Lonely Crowd, Doubleday & Co. Inc., N.Y., 1953.

When this is the case, the school curriculum should strongly emphasise the "need to achieve". Such an objective is essentially affective in nature and cannot be shared through passing on information bits. To achieve this objective, the content of curriculum may need to be strongly underscored by demonstration and empirical evidence. For example, projects in science may be assigned to groups of students to test the workability of certain principles in nutrition and health education as applied to the rearing of animals for gainful returns; other projects may be arranged through problems in arithmetic to demonstrate the benefits of planning for economic viability; yet others may show, through the study of history, geography and ethics, the correlation between man's innovative efforts, his ability to perceive the indicators of change and the success he generates.

The bias in the curriculum for such a society should be directed towards seeking new solutions for age-old practices. Unless this curiosity is fostered, the need to achieve remains attenuated.

It may be also anticipated, that given the right impetus, the next urbanisation phase will come with industrialisation in full strength. To prepare for this phase, the urbanite should also be taught certain work skills (both mental and practical). Socially, his tradition-orientation needs to be changed to the extent that he will be prepared to abandon certain values which are inimical to progress, without sacrificing the best of those which give him a sense of continuity with the past.

As urbanisation becomes increasingly supported by successful industrialisation, two sub-phases will be distinguishable. First, there is the assembly-line phase with its mechanistic ability to produce. The worker is in a complex organisation in which he is often relegated to the role of an automation. He is made responsible for copying, for reproducing, not so much for creating. Pride in one's handiwork is often not required in the mass production process, for the machine has taken over with economy both in time and in long-term investment. In a sense, the worker is able to conceal his identity in an abnegation of responsibility. Society has been levelled and when all are equal it is difficult to raise one's voice in difference.

Here, the school must help to promote collective responsibility. There is in the highly organised society an inherent threat of regression, just as a machine with many cogs and wheels may jam with one little cog malfunctioning. The question arising out of this

situation is how to teach collective responsibility without dampening independent judgment and critical thinking in schools.

With the second phase of successful industrialisation come into full view the effects of “electric technology” aptly described by McLuhan⁽⁶⁾:

“Since electric energy is independent of the place or kind of work-operation, it creates patterns of decentralism and diversity in the work to be done. This is a logic that appears plainly enough in the difference between firelight and electric light, for example. Persons grouped around a fire or candle for warmth or light are less able to preserve independent thoughts, or even tasks, than people supplied with electric light. In the same way, the social and educational patterns latent in automation are those of self-employment and artistic autonomy.”

Elsewhere he writes⁽⁷⁾ :

“We are suddenly threatened with a liberation that taxes our inner resources of self-employment and imaginative participation in society.”

The success of industrialisation and technification implies a liberation of the individual for leisure. How can we so educate that leisure may not be mistakenly identified with either idleness or distraction? “Leisure begins in that moment of consciousness peculiar to a rational being, when we become aware of our own existence and can watch ourselves act, when we have time to think of the worth and purpose of what we are doing, to compare with what we might or would rather be doing.”⁽⁸⁾ Paraphrasing both McLuhan and Frye, it is clear that the individual has again to learn to live with himself, having passed through a phase in which other-direction through a peer-culture has controlled his behaviour.

(6) McLuhan M., Understanding Media, Sphere Books Ltd. Lond. 1969, p.382

(7) McLuhan M., Op. cit p. 381.

(8) Frye N., “The Humanities in a New World.” University of Toronto Installation Lectures, 1958, p.21

Obviously, to anticipate it, the study of values assumes central importance. In the tradition-oriented society, these values were determined by superstition, folklore or familiar practice and fear of being shamed by the group held the individual to values of the group. In the highly industrialised, mechanistic culture, individuals in the city cut themselves adrift from the bonds of both the traditions and systems of belief. The latter are based in the authority of the family which no longer obtains. Thus in the second sub-phase of successful industrialisation and technological advance, the individual has to acquire a value system for which he has neither the support of tradition nor of family. The school has to supply the direction so seriously lacking in society. It must encourage a consensus on acceptable values, a committal to them which is based in meaningful and informed appreciation – differently from blind acceptance, as was the case with the tradition-directed society.

Common to the curriculum of schools in the various urban societies discussed – pre-industrial, industrialising and highly industrialised – should be activities which encourage collaborative effort. Such a one may be role-play in simulated conditions of potential strife and problem-solving for conflict resolution.

The physical environment of cities being such as they are, health and physical education should be essential and compulsory. Pupils should also be given sound knowledge of the environment in which they live so that they can learn to preserve it for the good of successive generations.

Above all, creativity must be encouraged and fostered, for, ironically, with highly successful industrialisation, man creates obsolescence. If at any time there is the need for innovation, this is the age. Innovation derives from creativity; there is no such thing as a purely intuitive hunch in the creative act. Underlying it there has to be persistence with ideas. Ideas come by thought, and thought by a difficult process of application whereby education and experience are brought to bear on diverse observations. To think through requires leisure and school is leisure. As Aristotle pointed out, the words school and scholarship derive from *schole*, leisure. This is not the same as the leisure commonly conceived by workers to be the balance of a four-day week. The implications of true leisure carry more than just time to do something else. What I am advocating here, therefore, is education for leisure, not education for the use of leisure.

Urbanisation and the organisation of schooling

Urban factors which have affected most the organisation of schooling are crowding on the one hand and the improvement of educational technology on the other. The former has compelled rethinking about the organisation of pupils, instruction and learning. The latter has made it possible to deploy pupils flexibly for individual, small-group and large-group instruction with consequent economy in the use of persons and space.

With the use of computers for instruction, it is possible to anticipate that when sufficient computer terminals become available for the setting up of learning stations, it may not be necessary to set up schools as they are now conceived. The resources of school may still include the library, the sports gymnasium, the hall, the tutorial rooms and the garden. But much of the child's classroom instruction may be piped to his home. School will be a place where, once more, teacher and pupil will meet in a personal encounter over that which cannot be delegated to the machine and, therefore, is of true human concern.

This new approach to the organisation of instruction calls for rethinking about the use of persons. By and large, teachers will fall into two main categories – those who instruct computers as to what to teach, and those who handle computers, activate them and assist them with teaching. The first group will be masters of the computers and will form the creative component of the teaching task force. They will be available to pupils for special consultation. The second group will be assistant to the computer and will be useful in so far as the programme fed to the computer is useful. Associated with these two groups there will be a class of specialists – the guidance counsellor, the librarian-teacher and the school medical officer. The key to instructional organisation will be teamwork.

Urbanisation and the Role of the School

The school can and should more directly and dynamically "be a force for social regeneration"⁽⁹⁾ – to borrow a pertinent phrase from Counts.

(9) Counts, G.S. Dare the School Build a New Social Order?, John Day, N.Y. 1932 pp. 30-31.

In the context of urbanisation-modernisation-industrialisation, the school should pick out the breach in the social defence structure and stand in where it is weakest, to repair and to build.

“Social engineering” has of late become part of the jargon of the computer age. It gives an insight into the widening crack in the wall developing through the increasing influence of a diffuse and anonymous authority, mediated through mass devices. To-day, technological progress presents the individual with only two alternatives – either to be manipulated by the standardising influences of modern society some of which are subtly and malevolently deliberate, or to be man again, freed from the machine which threatens to enslave him, autonomously directed by a clear sense of values, shared with others in a liberating conformity which is governed by constraints agreed to by mutual consent.

The school, then, must help the individual escape standardisation. It can plan schooling as a way of life to foster certain values and bring desirable character structures into relief. It can help to study and select values and ensure that both the curriculum and the life-style of the school reflect them.

However, the school cannot stand alone in doing this. The world outside with the many messages which mass media present gives the impression to the youngster of life and activity, not necessarily of meaning. The school to-day must play a part in community and be a community itself with better appeal, better rationale for living and a surer sense of direction: for, in a sense, this is what the young needs.

The Beatles sang wistfully,
“He is a real nowhere man,
Sitting in his nowhere land,
Making all his nowhere plans for nobody.
He does not have a point of view,
Knows not where he’s going to,
Isn’t he a bit like me and you.”

They reflect a generation’s wistfulness for direction and meaning. The school can only be directive if it takes into partnership community, the home and even the mass media, if its values can be allowed to permeate through those channels.