

# *Group Living for Teen-Agers*

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*The social adjustment of adolescents needs thoughtful evaluation and help. It is suggested by Warren C. Seyfert, director, Laboratory School, University of Chicago, that while these problems may be considered from the standpoint of the individual, they are no less common to a group, so that in planning worthwhile learning experiences, this latter point merits careful scrutiny.*

IN DISCUSSING the problems and needs of boys and girls, the common inclination is to treat these as though the developmental problems of each child were unique to him. Moreover, we tend to view each child's problems as peculiar to him in at least two respects; namely, that his problems are essentially unlike other youngsters' needs, and that his needs spring essentially from his own being and personality. So far as the first of these is concerned, more careful thought reveals that while the totality of each person's needs may be different from that of all others, there are many problem areas common to most adolescents; and that these problem areas persist from one school generation to the next. Were this commonness and this persistence not facts we would be hard-pressed to do any curriculum planning.

It is, however, the second respect in which we tend to view the uniqueness of adolescent needs that requires careful examination. For whether or not it is true, it has much to do with the content and organization of the learning experiences we design for young people, in school and out. While it may be admitted that the original motivations in life spring from the individual organism and its operation, on a practical and operational level, thoughtful observation reveals that, with minor exceptions, the

problems or needs of young people are created and obtain their meanings as a consequence of the individual's contacts with his fellow men. That is to say, for all practical purposes we can assume that the problems of young people are social in origin.

If this point of view is accepted and if, further, it is agreed that the principal business of the school is to help boys and girls solve more adequately their contemporary problems and to make preparation for solving their problems-in-prospect, rather fundamental implications can be drawn regarding the major emphases of the curriculum and the ways in which the school should exercise its responsibilities.

## THE PROBLEMS

There is neither space nor occasion here to attempt to present a complete catalog of the group-derived problems and needs of teen-aged youth; but a brief review of certain of the more significant of these may help to clarify the thesis advanced in the foregoing paragraphs, and to underline certain of the needs of adolescents which typically receive scant attention in our secondary schools.

### **Teen-agers Care About Their Looks**

Of paramount concern to teen-agers is the matter of personal appearance. It

may be that, fundamentally, the youngster's needs are for physical vitality and some protection from the elements. Practically, however, his concerns are not at that level. They take the form of satisfaction or distress from the opinions and acts of others in consequence of his appearance. A pimply face, *per se*, does not bother a boy; but the remarks and actions of others regarding his face constitute a real problem for him. A girl may be warm and tidy enough in last year's dress, but this does not lessen her unhappiness when she is singled out for comment by her peers because her clothes are out of date. A certain pattern of conduct may be entirely adequate to meet a given situation; but it may still represent a major problem for a child because it deviates from group standards or expectations. In our efforts to help pupils meet their problems in the field of personal health and appearance we shall surely fail if we do not recognize that what to us as adults may be superficial considerations constitute the real problems for the child.

#### **They Worry About Growth**

The same line of argument applies to a second problem area—that of making acceptable and satisfying heterosexual adjustments during adolescent years. The experiences which young people are permitted in making these adjustments are determined not so much by biological drives within the organism as by the controls and permissions acceptable to the society in which the individual finds himself. It is little wonder, then, that adolescence is a distressing phenomenon for young people when they must synthesize their own little-understood physical urges with the

varied and somewhat inconsistent demands and restrictions placed upon them by social control and group influence. These inconsistencies and demands make the real problem for the boy or girl, not the biological facts of adolescence.

#### **They Want to Feel Important**

A third problem confronting every young person is that of becoming a person of some consequence in the world. The dreams and ambitions of boys and girls vary markedly in this regard; but everyone possesses them in some measure. We often speak of these ambitions as the desire for security or as wanting to be accepted by others. But no matter how we phrase the idea, it is a problem—or rather, a complex of problems—with which the school must help adolescents to deal. Here again we have a source of concern to the individual which, though perhaps individual and biological elementally, is in actual practice socially determined in both kind and degree.

For example, what a boy or girl must do or not do to be accepted in one group or setting may be quite different from what is necessary in another context. It is easy to say that the youth or adult should set his own standards and measure his success by them; but actually it is the rare person who honestly feels that he is a person of consequence and integrity—that is, is personally secure—unless he has met the standards or expectations of the groups to which he belongs or in which he desires membership. In other words, the nature and scope of this developmental task are set for the adolescent in large measure by society.

### **They Want to Have Fun**

In the mind of every youngster, discovering and utilizing ways of having a good time, enjoying life, occupy considerable time and space. To be sure, this as a problem area is not totally different from the three which have been previously mentioned. Nonetheless, if we view the curriculum as a means for helping young people deal with their needs as they recognize them, the school must be prepared to help young people develop and apply techniques and standards for securing pleasure and satisfaction in their living. Here, too, in designing learning experiences, we must recognize both the permissive and limiting influences of the social contexts in which the individual operates. Although pleasure and satisfaction are fundamentally individual in nature, whether or not a particular act or experience is pleasurable or satisfying, depends in substantial part, upon the reactions of others to the action. Playing football may be physically exhilarating, but its main source of enjoyment is the working together with teammates to achieve a group-defined objective. The stimulation which comes from reading a thought-provoking book, or just an exciting one, may be enjoyed privately; but there are few people who can enjoy such an experience except as it is interpreted in the light of past or anticipated group contacts. The social control of other sources of personal satisfaction is equally obvious.

### **They Think About Earning a Living**

In one form or another the need for his earning a living is a problem for every adolescent. In some instances it

takes the rudimentary shape of awakening to the need of being able eventually to become economically independent. Other youngsters are making the preliminary explorations of possibilities. For still other young people, the problem has advanced to the stage of tentative selection and introductory preparation. In later adolescence and early adulthood, finding or improving means of actually earning a living is the crucial issue. In some degree, of course, the solutions to these problems which are available to the individual boy or girl are determined by his own talents, physical, mental, and emotional. But to a degree not generally recognized in guidance and occupational programs, available solutions and acceptable solutions are restricted or defined by other considerations—group pressures and social conditions. That is to say, making suitable occupational decisions, following them out, and securing employment, are acts which the individual by himself cannot control.

Take so obvious a matter as whether or not a youngster should endeavor to obtain and can obtain schooling beyond the secondary level. The urges for or against such schooling, may spring in part from his own feelings or plans; but with these must be coupled the influence of such factors as the availability of educational opportunities, the social prestige of more or less schooling, family or group interests, and the like. Influences of a like kind bear upon the youth when he is endeavoring to make his occupational selections, when he searches for employment, and when he is considering making a change in his occupation.

### **They Are Concerned About Right and Wrong**

Anyone who has worked intimately with young people of teen-age knows that though they are often most inarticulate about still another matter, and though they loudly disavow any interest in it, if directly confronted with the question, they are vitally concerned with what we may call the higher values in life. Ordinarily this concern must be inferred from their comments upon rather everyday matters, though it is surprising to many adults to see how readily and earnestly seemingly thoughtless and carefree youngsters will turn to a discussion of fundamental values in life. In fact, with permission or slight encouragement they manifest a profounder concern for and interest in the field of ethics and morals than do most grownups. Although the social origin or nature of this problem area may be less evident or less readily agreed to than in the case of others that have been presented, it is not to be denied that the actual nature of the problem as the individual sees it and the kinds of solutions which he can work out are strongly influenced by his small-group contacts and by the larger social setting in which he operates.

For example, he wants or is taught to want a consistent set of values, but he observes widespread inconsistency on the part of adults or perhaps the apparent absence of any set of values whatever. Or his thinking leads him to accept a certain moral or ethical pattern as individually and socially most satisfying, only to discover that others living by patterns quite different in character are easily achieving ends which by his standards are hard to realize. Hence,

even though it be thought that the fundamental desire to possess a set of values for living springs from other than human or group sources, it cannot be denied that the practical formulation of these values and their everyday application are strongly influenced by the people with whom the individual lives, works, and plays.

As was said earlier in this discussion, these six problem areas are not all of the needs or concerns of young people. Nor do they, in the form in which they are presented here, constitute the elements from which the curriculum of a secondary school can be constructed. For example, no attention has been given to the need for communication skills, the need of abilities to deal with quantitative data, the importance of factual information, and the significance of other problem-solving techniques such as (1) analyzing sources of data, (2) selecting pertinent facts, (3) thinking critically, and (4) achieving action in terms of decisions made. Such abilities as these obviously are needed by the boy or girl if he is to solve problems of the comprehensive sort which have been discussed. Then, too, those comprehensive problems seldom present themselves as such. Instead, they appear as a series of more specific incidents or situations with which the child must deal and on the basis of which the learning activities of the school must be constructed. Nevertheless, since we aim at giving the pupil general abilities rather than only a series of solutions to specific situations, we must make certain that, through his experiences with a variety of specific problem situations, he does develop more generalized competencies to deal

with such broad areas as have been illustrated in the foregoing pages.

## THE IMPLICATIONS

### Study Internal Structures

If we return now to the major thesis that young people's problems are social in origin, it is clear that *one implication of this point of view for the work of the schools is that they ought to give more thought and study to the nature and internal structure of school-sponsored groups than is typically the case.* Teachers are vaguely aware of the influence of school and non-school group pressures upon the attitudes and performance of individual pupils; but our knowledge of the ways in which such pressures operate and what they do to particular children is extremely limited. We must expand our knowledge in this area as rapidly as possible, meanwhile utilizing such knowledge as we have to arrange our learning groups better to recognize and use group-derived motives.

### Heed Group Influence

*A second implication is that teachers, in setting their standards or levels of expectation for pupils, should take fuller account of the influence of the groups in which pupils operate upon their acceptance of these standards.* Frequently we estimate the success of a youngster's growth by comparing it with measures of his own ability. Within limits, this may be a valid criterion, but if the expectations of the school differ substantially in kind or degree from those of the social contexts in which the child moves, we shall at best fail in our efforts, or at worst seriously disturb the

child through the conflict in pressures exerted upon him. This is not to say that we should accept existing group standards as the final determiners of the school's goals, nor that we are powerless to break through them. But we are unrealistic in our approach and cruel to the child if we fail to appraise these standards properly, or to recognize their meaning for the child.

### Utilize Social Meanings

*A third implication is that the teacher in his efforts to motivate learning should make as much use as he can of the group meaning or social utility of the learning in question.* To be sure, the youngster often says or has in mind the question, "What difference does this make to me?" But the difference he wonders about is not so much a strictly individual or personal one, as it is a difference in his position or influence in the groups in which he moves. Hence, a main source of motivation for the child will be a clearer understanding of the bearing of the proposed learning upon his relationships with other people.

### Recognize Values

Again, it follows from the thesis which has been advanced that *a large proportion of the learning activities in the school ought to be essentially group in character.* This does not rule out individual study or activity, for such are obviously prerequisite to the success of any group undertaking. But through carefully designed group experiences a number of values can be realized. In the first place, they can help the child and the teacher better to estimate the nature of socially determined drives. The child and the teacher may realize only

vaguely or in an indefinite way that such drives or pressures exist, but may not be able easily or precisely to define them. Through group experiences under the observation of the teacher, the nature of these drives can be more exactly defined and ways of dealing with them worked out.

Through group experiences we also provide the child and the teacher with the only fundamentally valid means of determining whether or not the problems and needs of boys and girls are being met to the satisfaction of the young people themselves. To return to an illustration used earlier, we can give the pimply adolescent practical help in getting rid of his pimples; and we can check to see whether he uses our help and whether the pimples disappear. But the really significant evidence as to whether or not we have helped him solve his problem will be obtained by observing his relations with his fellow students to see if these relations are more comfortable for both him and them, even should the pimples remain.

#### **Balance Planning With Informality**

If we accept the proposition that the problems of young people are social in origin and that, further, the solutions for these problems—and the evaluation of these solutions—are most likely to come from group experiences, *it follows that the school ought to give more careful attention to the so-called informal or unplanned activities within the school program.* In activities of this kind, normal group pressures are most free to operate and the child most free to react to them. It is unlikely that the school program ought to be made up entirely of such informal groups and activities;

but it does seem certain that a larger part of school life should be reserved for activities and observation of such groups.

#### **Consider Changing Characteristics**

*One final implication is that a given child's problems are not constant in character; for the fact that he is a member of many groups or social settings whose expectations or standards vary, means that the specific nature of a given type of problem for an adolescent changes as his associations change.* Hence, in helping the student meet his needs or solve his problems, the school must not be content with aiding him to obtain a single solution. Rather, he needs a set of solutions and the ability to adapt these solutions to new and unanticipated variations of the basic problem.

In general, if we are serious in our intent to build the life and work of the school around problems and needs which young people have, we must look to social or group relationships characteristic of adolescents for the surest and most realistic expressions of these problems. We must make more use of significant groups for instructional purposes, and must develop a point of view regarding, and techniques for, the use of interactions within group settings for evaluating the success of the school's efforts. Although it is usually recognized that "content" and "method" must be related, we tend to retain in our thinking a distinction between the two. If the point of view which has been presented here is sound, group living within the school is far more than only method. It is the essence of content as well.

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