

# The Adjustment Problem in the Senior High School

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The problem indicated in the title includes such items as youth needs, teaching practices, and a host of organizational aspects. In this discussion Hubert M. Evans, associate professor of natural sciences at Teachers College, Columbia University, looks at the school culture and factors in it that affect the problem of adjustment.

THE PRESENCE of increasingly large numbers of poorly adjusted students in the senior high school has been well documented in the studies of drop-outs, failures, discipline cases, and the like. The increase in numbers of maladjusted students parallels the growth of the senior high school population. The tenth grade group in the average high school today is more likely than not to contain ninety percent or more of all the youth in that age group.

Essentially, maladjustments among young people flow from or are accentuated by the nonadaptive nature of the school culture, the cultural lag between the school and the larger culture of which it is a part, and *the great increase in the number and variety of general and specific adjustments necessitated by the nature of the school population and the society in which youth live*. This latter phenomenon has literally overwhelmed the senior high school, creating in a very real sense one of the most acute organizational and curriculum problems in the whole of the American educational enterprise.

## We Cannot By-Pass the Problems

To state that adjustment problems have overwhelmed the senior high

school does not imply that such problems are unsolvable. On the contrary, most of them can be solved if the proper resources are brought to bear on their solution. As a matter of fact, *the insistent, the not-to-be denied need for each individual youth to achieve that quality and degree of adaptiveness required by his own development and by the society in which he lives* no longer leaves us much choice in the matter. In addition, devotion to the democratic ideal which postulates the fullest development of every human resource as a supreme good, requires an adequate solution to the adjustment problem.

It is the purpose of this discussion to deal briefly with some of the school environmental factors or cultural determinants which experience has shown are fundamentally related to the solution of adjustment problems and which *cannot safely be by-passed* in attempts at their solution.

## Let's Look at Major Cultural Factors

To focus on the culture of the senior high school—the total atmosphere—may seem a bit unorthodox, yet the school culture is of paramount importance. It is the general context out of which the concrete factors related to

adjustment problems emerge and have their being. In the last analysis, it is the culture of the school that is decisive in matters of significant adjustments, their quality, and their adequacy. The mores which form the school culture and which are supported by it determine the nature of the learning environment, and, in no small degree, the "take-away" experiences of young people.

That the school culture is critically related to the adjustment problem is illustrated by an examination of some factors and relationships which experience indicates are of great importance in any program of curriculum development, school reform, or reconstruction aimed at improving adjustments. As operationally interpreted by many workers in senior high schools, the adjustment problem appears to be intimately related to the following factors which, if modified or changed significantly, require a change in one or more aspects of the school culture. It will be noticed that many of these factors overlap and are closely inter-related.

**Tradition**, with its supporting dogma and unexamined assumptions, is the essence of school culture and is related in some degree to all factors affecting adjustment. It is a cultural determinant of greatest influence. Tradition accounts for the persistence of certain mores, many of which are lethal to change. Traditions may be unique to a given school. There is no necessary correlation between traditions in the senior high school and those in the associated community.

**The hierarchy of power** in the senior high school is a pervasive factor

in adjustment problems. It includes relations between and among administrators, teachers, pupils, parents, board of education members; it determines lines of authority and responsibility. The hierarchy of power frequently shapes the school culture and, in the long run, it must be sustained by the school culture. It influences every phase of school activity and beyond, vitally affecting the role of the teacher and impinging on every youth.

Although a hierarchy of power is necessary in any ordered society, it seems difficult to gear it to a democratic philosophy, to the "grass roots." In the senior high school the power pattern can be and frequently is inflexible, thus influencing adversely the fluidity of the school culture and complicating adjustment problems. That the senior high school power hierarchy may need reform is recognized by many schoolmen. What direction this reform should take ought to be dictated in part by the adaptive needs of youth. This implies a broader based consent and participation leading to more effective democratic procedures, leadership, and control.

One thing seems certain: no general or particularized attack on adjustment problems can by-pass the existing hierarchy of power in any school. That the power pattern in the senior high school can block or facilitate, or distort needed reform in the school culture, is well known. Whatever the nature of the required reform may be, the hierarchy of power must be in line with it if adequate adjustments are to be furthered.

**The cooperation-competition complex** (or paradox) which exists in every

senior high school is determined by the culture. It is undoubtedly one of the most potent factors in the over-all adjustment problem. It is the source of many stresses, strains, and conflicting goals. Required adjustment to this complex often create serious personality difficulties. So important is the cooperation-competition complex in relation to the adjustment problem, and other problems as well, that a word or two concerning its status in the senior high school is needed.

The dominance of competition over sustained cooperation is one of the most striking features of the senior high school culture. The fact is that the typical senior high school is not geared to cooperation. Worse yet, cooperation is not normally expected in the school community. Administrative organization and practice wall off teachers in subjects, departments, and classrooms. The school mores are more in line with competition than cooperation. Youth competes with youth in and out of the classroom. Departments compete for the student's time and attention. Frequently, potentially valuable cooperation among students is looked upon as cheating. The cooperation that exists is often mechanical and short lived. It is rarely spontaneous. Excessive competition, or lack of needed cooperation, profoundly conditions the quality of living in the senior high school and limits boundaries for problem solution.

The cooperation-competition complex is of wide cultural significance particularly in a technologically driven, adaptive society. It not only creates adaptive needs for youth but also limits opportunities for meeting these needs. It seems clear that the school culture

will need considerable overhauling to achieve a rational balance between co-operation and constructive competition. Practices in the senior high school which accentuate needless and harmful competition must be re-examined in the light of the adjustment problems of young people. This may lead and probably should lead, for example, to the elimination or drastic reconstruction of such prominent landmarks of school life as marks, examinations, prizes, and the like. But to do so will require a change in the school culture.

***Postulates of impotence***, to borrow a term from the physical sciences, refer to certain pervasive "can'ts," "nevers," "impossibles," which complicate adjustments and which are often rooted in the school culture. Prevailing postulates such as "you can't change human nature," "I.Q.'s never change," "can't teach this," need further study in relation to the adaptive needs of youth.

Although postulates of impotence reflect the school culture, many are sustained on grounds of expediency or convenience, frequently without any clearly articulated rationale. Again, this is a case of a factor creating adaptive needs and, at the same time, limiting opportunities for intelligently resolving conflicts and releasing tensions throughout the school culture. It is obvious that the need for clearing away false and harmful postulates of impotence is important. Nothing is more lethal to adequate adjustment than an outmoded renunciatory postulate.

***Persistent dualisms***, to use a classical phrase, dominate a considerable realm of thinking and action in the

senior high school. Mental *and* physical, vocational *and* academic, school *and* community, administrators *and* teachers, curricular *and* extra-curricular, illustrate what is meant here. Dualisms, in the main, grow out of the socio-psychology prevalent in the senior high school culture; a socio-psychology which in many of its aspects has been outmoded by newer knowledge and insights. Dualisms are often the source of impotence postulates. They tend to retard seriously the unitary development of the school curriculum which, experience shows, is required to care for the adaptive needs of young people. Obviously, the eradication of harmful dualisms will require some rather drastic reconstruction of the school culture.

*The obsolescence-ignorance* complex takes us to the heart of the adjustment problem. It is a central issue in curriculum development—a way of looking at the process-content problem. The obsolescence-ignorance complex existing in the school culture largely determines what is taught and how it is to be taught. A word of explanation may be needed.

Obsolescence refers to the persistence in the school program and culture of those skills, knowledges, and values which no longer function effectively and widely with respect to the adaptive needs of youth. Ignorance refers to those skills, knowledges, and values available in the cultural heritage (past and current) which are required by the adaptive needs of youth but which, for one reason or another, are denied youth. Obsolescence and ignorance are brought together for the reason that in

a very real sense the perpetuation of obsolescence perpetuates ignorance. For example, we can hardly expect a youth to learn the skills he needs while his time is occupied with the "learning" of skills he doesn't need. Of course, the relationship is not as clear nor as simple as this illustration indicates.

The important point concerning obsolescence and ignorance, as defined here, is that both are critical in the adjustment problem faced by the senior high school. Further, it is of greatest importance that we recognize that we are not dealing with casual obsolescence and ignorance but *school sanctioned obsolescence* and *school sanctioned ignorance*. The latter is quite intriguing and deserves further comment.

School sanctioned ignorance raises some fundamental questions that go beyond the school culture. It takes us into the whole realm of communications and to the current objectives guiding the educational enterprise in our democracy. To what extent, if any, should a culture or sub-culture, should a group or sub-group, deny *to any* individual access *to any* skill, knowledge, or value which may be significant to him in terms of his adaptive needs? Take controversial domestic economic, political, and social problems—sex, venereal diseases, Russia and communism—a host of social skills and democratic commitments as somewhat classical examples relevant to the senior high school. On what basis can a school justify the walling off or shunning of any area of skill, knowledge, or value which can be demonstrated to be related to the adaptive needs of youth? Space forbids more than the raising of these all-important questions. However, a blanket assertion

can be ventured. Every youth living in our technologically driven, adaptive, democratic society—in a world literally in process of reconstruction under our feet, should have the right of ready access to any available skill, knowledge, or commitment required by his adaptive needs.

Space forbids further listing and discussion of other equally important factors or cultural determinants related to the adjustment problem. The network of social relations, the goals and evaluation complex, the sub-group complex with its discriminating aspect, the process-content problem, and the teacher-pupil complex must also be understood and taken into account in any realistic attack on adjustment problems in the senior high school.

In addition, the obsolescence-ignorance problem of the professional members of the school community has been neglected. That this general problem is intimately related to the culture of the school and to adjustment problems is obvious. A detailed analysis of the adaptive needs of youth would also be required for an adequate discussion of the adjustment problem, as would be the problem of change which has its own unique characteristics.

#### There Is the School's Community

No doubt, many who are immersed in this discussion are itching to shout, "What about the community?" Well, of course, the school's community is all important. The culture of the senior high school is a sub-culture with respect to the wider community. The school does not have a completely insular cultural status but it possesses enough au-

tonomy to shape its own cultural pattern to a considerable degree.

Community and school cultures have developed and continue to develop somewhat independently of one another. One may be more static or more dynamic than the other. This produces whatever cultural lag exists, which, in some communities, may be fairly extensive. But cultural lag between school and community is not necessarily bad. It depends upon which one is ahead, how far ahead, and the relative rates of change which characterize each. It depends upon how the lag is related to the adaptive needs of youth.

School workers often blame the community culture for shortcomings in the senior high school program and culture. This may be true enough in many cases. But we need to ask ourselves as professional workers whether we are not, in this instance, resorting to a ready alibi which has status among school people. Perhaps the central reason resides in the non-readiness of the school culture and in the obsolescence-ignorance complex of the professional group in the school community. Sex education is a case in point. Actually the boundaries set by the community for school program-cultural change and reconstruction are not well known. And the high school is not likely to discover its outer limits for change unless it crowds boundaries. This is a basic assumption underlying the focus on school culture developed in this argument. It does not exclude the desirability of school-community cultural development. But it does suggest that an effective approach to achieving a greater community permissiveness is to start with reconstruction of the school culture.

## Youth Needs Take Precedence

As a concluding remark, the central importance of the adaptive needs of youth should be re-emphasized. This takes precedence over professional convenience, or the preservation of tradi-

tional mores, or the preservation of traditional subject matter and practices. The senior high school is not likely to furnish effective help to young people today unless it reconstructs its program, and this will inevitably mean the remaking of its culture.

# *For Whom Are High Schools Designed?*

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HAROLD C. HAND

In this brief review of three of the "basic studies" in the Illinois Secondary School Curriculum Program, Harold C. Hand, professor of education at the University of Illinois, focuses our attention on the question of the provisions today's high schools are making for *all* the children of *all* the people.

THE ILLINOIS Secondary School Curriculum Program (hereafter referred to as the ISSCP) is a cooperative enterprise instituted by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and sponsored by over thirty statewide organizations variously representing agriculture, business, industry, labor, and the State Congress of the PTA, as well as all of the identifiable state professional educational organizations in any way concerned with secondary education. All of the state colleges, the state university, and most of the private colleges and universities are assisting in the program on a cost-free basis.

The Illinois Association of Secondary School Principals was the "spark plug" which "touched off" this organization.

### **The Scope of Activity**

The ISSCP is entirely permissive in character. Any secondary school in the state may participate or not as it sees fit. In the first year of its existence (1947-48), nearly 150 of the state's recognized high schools were participants. Principally, there were the medium- and large-sized schools, though several member institutions have enrollments ranging from less than fifty to one hundred pupils.

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