

LIFE ADJUSTMENT

Opens New Doors to Youth

Life Adjustment Advocates:

Learning experiences appropriate to capacities
General and specialized outcomes
Education for living as well as for a livelihood
Skill in fundamentals
Deferred as well as immediate values
Emphasis on the dignity of work
Education for moral living.

Life Adjustment Does Not Advocate:

Easy learning
A national pattern of education
Information rather than formation of character
Lowered standards
Doors of culture closed to the majority of youth
Materialistic standards of success
Rejection of basic values.

THE EXPRESSION "Life Adjustment" entered educational terminology in June 1945, as part of a memorable speech by the late Dr. Charles A. Prosser at a national conference on vocational education. Two years later the United States Commissioner of Education appointed a Commission on Life Adjustment Education for Youth. Thus was launched a national movement which has greatly influenced trends in secondary education since World War II. The heart of the movement has been consistently its aim to help schools retain all youth through at least the twelfth grade and thus "to equip them to live democratically with satisfaction to themselves and profit to society as home members, workers, and citizens."¹ Obviously all recent progress toward this aim cannot be attributed to life adjustment educa-

tion. Much of it can, as may be verified by reading the reports of the two commissions.²

Every Youth in High School

The fundamental principle of American democracy is recognition of the inherent dignity of the human individual and of unalienable rights bestowed on each one by the Creator. Guided by this principle and building on foundations laid by the American Youth Commission, the Educational Policies Commission, and other groups in the 1930's, the Life Adjustment Movement has been most effective in focusing attention on the inadequacy of present-day high schools for the variety of youth who should be in them. Through provocative pamphlets directed toward both professional and

¹ All direct quotations are taken from *Life Adjustment Education for Every Youth*. Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1951, p. 9-10.

² *Vitalizing Secondary Education*, Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1950. *A Look Ahead in Secondary Education*, Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1954.

lay persons, through conferences of educators from all over the country, and through widespread publicity it has brought the nation to realize that educational opportunity is widely varied, that fundamental rights have been denied many youth during the years of their greatest need, and that somehow school holding power must turn the drop-out into the stay-in. Even the sharpest critics of life adjustment have been forced to admit defects in a system that withholds secondary education from so many of its future citizens.

As a result school doors have opened more widely and more invitingly than ever before. But there is little merit in inducing youth to enter these doors unless inside the way is clear to varied opportunities for full personal growth and development. The offering of equal opportunity is not synonymous with identical experience.

Total Individual Development

Life adjustment education means fundamentally that the curriculum should be based upon the needs of youth in present-day society. It is evident that this theory may be variously applied as different philosophies of education make use of it. Certainly it is not necessarily pragmatic nor scornful of traditions. It is not even new, for no fact is more clear in educational history than that school curriculums in their beginnings were based directly on life needs of the people. A valid concept of needs recognizes those which are common to all persons and places because of the common elements in human nature and human society. It also recognizes the great

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physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social differences which exist among individuals and communities.

Meeting the needs of all youth means offering "learning experiences appropriate to their capacities" and stimulating each individual to "the maximum achievement of which he is capable." It means helping each one to find and accept his personal responsibility in the Divine plan, and so to be that well-adjusted personality who finds happiness and who contributes to the happiness and welfare of others. It means recognition of differences in environment which demand diversity in over-all organization. Said the first Commission: "The same pattern should not be adopted in one community merely because it was effective in another . . . Even in general education . . . common goals are to be attained through differentiation both as to subject matter and experience."

Life adjustment programs therefore choose curriculum materials to meet needs. Significantly the process has been characterized by more valid use of existing fields of study than by in-

roduction of new ones. Language arts presents a good example. Every school seeks to guide students to skill in communication, and the accepted method has tended to be along roads leading to a single set of standards. Many schools are now developing English courses in which poorly equipped students may work from their own level toward the maximum attainment of which they are capable. Properly administered these courses carry no label of inferiority. Like all other courses they meet important needs. Developmental reading is also helping students to acquire those abilities which open doors to progress in every phase of scholastic life. In some schools it brings success to students who a few years ago would have been floundering in a Latin class. On the other hand gifted students must also be challenged. Language arts and science experiences provide effective enrichment to complete personal development and at the same time meet pressing social needs of today. Wherever students are being brought to realistic development of talents and social needs are adequately served—there is life adjustment at its best.

Education and Life

It is a generally accepted principle that education should prepare students in light of the particular circumstances of their lives, not for complete subserviency to a social milieu, but for cultivation of a sense of personal responsibility to preserve values and remove defects. To re-establish this essential relationship in twentieth century schools which have been unable to keep pace with scientific and tech-

nological advance, life adjustment emphasizes homemaking, civic life, and work, the areas of living common to all people.

Almost universal is interest in strengthening family life as basic to a stable society. Studies of problems of family living have been made in communities and the school's role in solving them critically appraised. Courses in homemaking have multiplied, but more significant for problem solving has been utilization of the rich resources in science, physical education, mathematics, literature, art, and music. Relationships between school and life are thus clarified, and subject fields are vivified as parts of unified life experience.

Similar procedures move education for citizenship from the confining covers of a textbook to actual life in the community. Since most life activities involve the coordinated use of many powers, there must be opportunity for doing whole things related to life. Such problem solving activities unify various subjects and foster responsibility, initiative, good judgment, and respect for others.

Vocational competency is a legitimate goal of secondary education even in college preparatory programs leading to professions and business. Life adjustment education respects all kinds of work because of the dignity of the human worker. It has deep concern for the vocational fitness of those who neither go to college nor enter the highly skilled occupations. Without undermining general education which is its primary duty, it provides for exploration and vocational choice which belong to adolescence. It cannot teach

specific skills for every type of work but emphasizes habits of good workmanship and provides experiences in learning how to work with others. It encourages work experience programs because they offer the only way to meet the needs of many youth. Large numbers work outside school hours already, and there are untold possibilities for real educational experience when schools and employers cooperate.

It is apparent that cooperative planning by teachers and active cooperation among educators, pupils, parents, and community are essential when school programs are unified through directing many areas toward life goals. Hence lay participation in school planning and administration is encouraged to strengthen bonds between school and home. Outstanding success has been achieved in many places.

Basic Skills Are Important

When life experiences are publicized the impression is sometimes created that only immediately practical results are sought, that subjects are debased by problem solving, and that fundamental tools are neglected. But the approach from life problems has been used by all great teachers who know that the human mind moves naturally from familiar to unfamiliar. When a teacher in rural midwest postpones difficult definitions and starts biology class with an ear of corn from the family crop, he is using a psychological approach to understanding basic principles and shows no disrespect for logical sequence. An initial life problem in mathematics is not an automatic rejection of skills. Life adjustment "recognizes the importance of funda-

mental skills since citizens in a democracy must be able to compute, to read, to write, to listen, and to speak effectively." But it does not consider skills as ends in themselves. They are emphasized "as tools for further achievement."

Life Adjustment Is An Action Movement

If educational history gives distinction to the Life Adjustment Movement it seems to me that this will be primarily because it has created awareness of conditions, stirred local initiative, insisted on cooperation among educators and laymen, and united scattered programs of curriculum reorganization. It has never suggested a national pattern of education. It has not devised a single course to be adopted by all schools in the name of Life Adjustment. Its leaders have constantly encouraged local administrators and teachers to re-examine their philosophy, restate their goals, survey their resources, and rebuild curriculum in direct relation to their findings. It has brought general and vocational educators into close association on numerous projects. It has removed barriers between public and parochial school educators who have gained mutual understanding by working together on common problems. It has publicized significant studies of youth problems and encouraged other movements inaugurated to solve them. Those close to the movement tend to approve better core and general education programs, more valid instruments of evaluation, and improved marking systems. They favor the comprehensive high school over specialized ones

because they believe it cares successfully for individual differences and promotes social unity.

Life adjustment has been highly praised and bitterly condemned. The name itself has probably been its greatest handicap. Those two words may logically be interpreted as education aiming for well-adjusted personalities who strive for personal improvement and to make just contribution to society, and this is the meaning given by sponsors of the movement. Unfortunately the words lend themselves readily to an interpretation that makes adjustment a complete submission to the *status quo* and a rejection of lasting values. Critical definitions easily become stereotypes, and stereotypes are never fair estimates. They are only convenient weapons for critics who do not explore both sides of questions. Progressive Education; Child-centered School; Life Adjustment—these have become stereotypes in the vocabulary

of many critics of today's schools. They carry implications often remote from practices of proponents. Conversely, Classicist; Traditionalist; Fundamentalist—these too are stereotypes. The truth is that the two groups have more in common than they realize because they so seldom come together. One of the most profound classicists in my acquaintance uses the most progressive methods of teaching. I have listened to progressive philosophers who are tied to traditional teaching procedures.

Education for human living should be cooperative activity of pupil, home, school, church, and community by means of which youth gain knowledge and skills and apply these to life problems; by which they are led to respect their fellow men; to share their personal gifts and the resources of the earth according to the plan of God, to work with dignity, to live in unity. This, I believe, is life adjustment.



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