The Junior High School
Is No Stepchild

Unique purposes and functions have evolved the junior high school as it is known today. What are some of its potentials as it seeks always to serve better the needs of preadolescents in our society?

Along with the unprecedented increase in the number of early adolescents now in the schools and the concomitant need for building facilities has come a significant, persistent movement to re-examine the philosophy, purposes and program of the junior high school. Among the many problems now being considered by educators in this evaluation is whether the junior high school should be an upward extension of the elementary school or a miniature senior high school.

The contention here is that the junior high school is an established integral part of our school system with unique purposes and functions. Hence it can be neither a prototype of the elementary school nor of the senior high school. The movement to establish junior high schools has grown steadily and substantially from the first one in 1909 to the present when there are nearly 4,000 schools which are specifically designated as junior high schools. In addition there are nearly 9,000 junior-senior high schools, in most of which two or three of the lower grades are essentially separated from the upper grades and are carrying on some semblance of a junior high school program. These two types of junior high schools represent over 50 per cent of all types of public high schools in this country. This almost extraordinary growth has convinced most educators that the junior high school is a recognized established unit of our school system. Moreover, the evolving unique purposes and functions, which will be discussed later, have substantiated the need for such schools.

Careful study of most junior high school programs all over the country can lead to only one conclusion—they are designed to exemplify the senior high school program much more than the elementary program. In other words, most junior high schools are miniature senior high schools. It should be said here, however, that during the past 10 or 15 years there has been a trend in many communities to develop a junior high school program specifically planned to meet the needs of early adolescents.

The junior high school has been categorized as “the stepchild,” “the tramp steamer,” “the forgotten segment” and “the afterthought” of our system of public education. This is understandable. It
has had to be satisfied with wearing the secondhand or handed-down clothing of the senior high schools. Its watered-down senior high school curriculum provides little individuality and few or no purposes which are unique. It has, in many communities, been so unimportant that an old high school building, ready for discard, has become its home. Its program has had to fit a building which was not designed to provide good educational experiences for early adolescents. Its teachers are those who were trained mainly to work in the senior high school with a scattering of those trained for elementary schools. Many of these teachers are in junior high schools, not because they want to be, but rather as a result of administrative shuffling. Many are simply marking time until they can be reassigned to a senior high school or an elementary school. There is little hope in the near future for relieving this personnel problem because teacher education institutions are also generally ignoring the junior high school. Few institutions have teacher education programs which basically recognize the purpose and functions of the modern junior high school and few are developing a program to educate teachers and leaders who can implement those purposes and functions.

Regardless of the current status, the junior high school appears to be here to stay. If it were not it could not have survived for nearly 50 years and could not have experienced the continuous, significant increase in numbers. Since the junior high school has become an integral part of our system of public education, it is important that it be given the same attention and consideration accorded the senior high school and the elementary school. Careful studies of existing programs indicate the need for a reorganization and for a “new look.” This will require a complete re-examination and restudy of the purposes and functions as they relate to taking care of the needs, concerns and interests of early adolescents.

**Purpose and Function**

In addition to general goals of education applicable to the junior high school, such as those proposed by the Educational Policies Commission, there are a number of unique purposes and functions which should be served by the junior high school. Since the origin of the junior high school, sweeping changes have taken place in society and there are numerous researches which provide new and useful information about the growth and development of early adolescents and about learning. Surely it would be most unusual, if purposes and functions developed a half century ago, were, in the light of new developments and findings, applicable in toto to the modern junior high school.

A study of the purposes, function and program should be given high priority by national organizations and groups that are interested in the education of early adolescents. It is even more important that local school systems dedicate their efforts to study and experimentation which are designed to improve the program of this important organizational unit.

In the succeeding discussion an attempt will be made to point out a few unique purposes and functions of the junior high school. Moreover, consideration will be given to how these purposes are now being implemented with suggestions for further implementation.

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Meeting the needs of early adolescents. The one major basic purpose of the junior high school has been expressed by Gruhn and Douglass—"The Junior High School is an educational program which is designed particularly to meet the needs, the interests, and the abilities of boys and girls during early adolescence."

One of the assumptions which has influenced the development of the junior high school is that young people in the 12-14 age group are significantly unlike elementary children in the developmental period of later childhood and also quite different from youth who are in the advanced period of puberty in the senior high school. The variance here applies to their intellectual, physical, emotional and social growth. There are probably no other three years from kindergarten through senior high school where the range of differences is as significant and as pronounced. Fritz Redl has said, "It is characteristic of preadolescents or young adolescents that for a while they go through a phase which I might call organismic disorganization."

In this period of rapid, dramatic changes in all aspects of growth, many new problems, concerns and interests arise which are peculiar and unique to early adolescents. Since many of these problems are common to all or almost all pupils, the program needs to provide experiences which will help young people to solve these problems and thereby better understand themselves, each other, and their place in society. The fact that these young people are in a transitional period of growth during which they have problems, concerns and interests which are quite different from those of pupils in the elementary schools and senior high schools is the most potent reason why the junior high school is a justifiable unit in our school system. Moreover, this is also a major reason why this unit cannot be an upward extension of the elementary school or a replica of the senior high school.

Providing for general education rather than special education. The term general education as used here refers to that part of the total school program in which an attempt is made to help young people solve common problems, personal, personal-social, social-civic, and economic, which are of concern to them and which arise as they interact with society.

Although there are many who would disagree with this particular concept of general education, there has been a trend to extend general education upward so that at the present time most colleges include such a program at least in the freshman and sophomore years.

General education in the junior high school has special significance because of the many and varied problems which emerge during the transitional period when early adolescents are making rapid growth changes. One of the best arguments for including the ninth grade in the junior high program is to assure one more year of general education and to delay for an additional year the emersion of boys and girls into the highly academic, special education program of the senior high school.

As one looks at the present junior high school program there is much evidence that its general education function is being ignored. In many junior high schools electives begin in the seventh grade and less than one-half the total

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program includes common experiences for all. The courses offered are, in general, patterned after specialized senior high school courses, with little time given to helping pupils deal with the personal, personal-social, social-civic and economic problems which are of concern to them and to society.

The general education function of the junior high school is its most important function. If it is to be realized there is a need for careful study of the needs, concerns and interests of early adolescents. Moreover, provision must be made in the program for consideration of these needs, concerns and interests. Unless this is done the case for the junior high school as an established unit in our school system is in jeopardy.

Providing for articulation and integration. The establishment of the junior high school has created two breaks or gaps in the organizational sequence contrasted with one which existed under the 8-4 plan. Unless careful planning is carried on to reduce the trauma, the problems of articulation become magnified.

There are many ways in which articulation can be furthered. In modern junior high schools, the seventh grade program is quite similar to that of the sixth grade. This is accomplished through providing a block or core program in which a teacher has the same boys and girls for half-day or more. In some junior high schools pupils go to a different teacher each period in the day which, when compared to the self-contained elementary classroom, serves to thwart articulation. Articulation is furthered when elementary and junior high school teachers, students and parents have continuous opportunities to interact; when the seventh grade core teacher comes to know his pupils during the time they are in the elementary school; when comprehensive cumulative records are shared; when elementary pupils have planned visits to the junior high school and when every sixth grade pupil knows that his core teacher will help him with his problems as his elementary teacher has. These and other worthwhile procedures are equally applicable in closing the gap between the junior and senior high school. Only through purposeful planning can articulation, which is a most important function of the junior high school, be furthered.

The integrative function of the junior high school is a significant and desirable one. It is the responsibility of the junior high school to take pupils where they are in their growth toward the objectives of education and to provide opportunities for them to solve problems which are of concern to them, so that they can continue to experience optimum growth. This approach to integration gives purpose to subject matter in that it is related to life situations. Integration cannot adequately be achieved in a highly departmentalized program. Hence the core, or block program, has become a common element in the junior high school program design. In the core full and free opportunity is provided for consideration of pupil problems and concerns and for cutting across arbitrary lines of subject matter disciplines.

It is generally recognized that early adolescents have many special needs for guidance. Integration is accomplished in this regard through cumulative records and through having the core teacher remain with the same group of pupils for the three-year period. The common problems of these pupils become the curriculum of the core class. The core teacher, who knows his pupils intimately, serves as counselor to pupils when individual, special problems arise.
Providing for exploration and activity. Exploration in the junior high school has several purposes. First, it should contribute to general education and consequently should be planned as an integral part of the common experiences provided all pupils. Second, it should provide new experiences which broaden the horizons of boys and girls. In many schools manual arts or homemaking experiences would do this. Third, it should provide new skills, such as those necessary in learning the touch system in typing, which are useful to all or almost all pupils. Fourth, it should give pupils experiences which will help them choose more wisely electives in the ninth grade and in senior high school.

Exploration permeates the entire program of the junior high school. For example, in the core, pupils should have an opportunity to explore interests in creative writing, vocations, public speaking, literature, and many other areas of experience. Most modern junior high schools also use several periods per day in which classes are provided for a period of 9 to 12 weeks or for a semester which are designed to satisfy one or more of the purposes listed above. Common exploratory courses are science, homemaking, choral music, art, typing, manual arts and a host of others. Such courses are usually selected and planned to supplement the exploration carried on in the core and to assure maximum opportunity for exploration. Since exploratory courses are a part of the general education program, they cannot be elective.

There are many characteristics of early adolescents, such as reduced attention span and restlessness, which point up the need for considerable activity in the program. This must be provided for primarily in the classroom. Junior high school teachers should be aware of the need for pacing the program so that one activity is not continued for too long a period. They need to provide a variety of experience involving social activities, large muscle activity and projects which give opportunities for social action. Where this is done the need for activity can be satisfied, where it is not done junior high schools have had to institute clubs, programs and other projects which are extra-class in nature. This does not mean that extra-class activities are not desirable. The desire on the part of early adolescents to establish new social relationships, especially with the opposite sex, demands a comprehensive, well planned activity program.

The next five to ten years should determine the future of the junior high school—whether it will continue as an established unit and whether it will gain in respectability and stature. During this period the enrollment will swell and new facilities will have to be provided. Here is an opportunity for those concerned about education for early adolescents to “put the house in order”—to re-examine and reformulate the purposes and functions—to develop a program which will meet the general and unique needs of this worthy group of young people—to plan buildings which will provide facilities for this distinctive program—to develop a teacher education program which will supply teachers who have specific skills, understandings and abilities necessary to work effectively with early adolescents and perhaps to provide a name for the school which is more descriptive of its purposes and functions.