

## Do Schools Have a Role in Adjustment?

Several popular conceptions of "adjustment" as an objective of education are here cited and analyzed.

IN THE most fundamental sense, we are *all* "for" adjustment as a major concern of our schools. The very nature of man, characterized by the extreme helplessness of infancy and the lengthy dependence upon others during the years of childhood and adolescence, makes evident the need for an effective and continuing relationship between the individual and his environment. Indeed, as Shaffer pointed out, "One of the most basic generalizations of the biological sciences is that all living organisms tend to vary their activities in response to changed conditions in their environments. . . . As long as the animal continues to adjust and to modify its responses it continues to live. If it fails to adjust in some degree, its existence is imperiled. When the animal ceases entirely to adjust, it is dead."<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the nature of society and of group life demands a liberal measure of the "social cement" that is derived from the development of a body of shared values by its members. Schools have provided much of this "social cement" as the agents of societies charged with communicating the values of the culture and

the collective experience of its people. Each of us, unless he be a complete anarchist, is forced to recognize that a central responsibility of the school is that of helping each child to adjust to the culture of which he is a part.

Viewed in terms of the nature of man and the nature of society, the choice of being "for" or "against" adjustment is a false one. In reality we have no choice. It is either adjustment or death—death for the individual and death for the society.

What then is all the current squabbling about? Why is it that the question of schools and adjustment has become the immediate counterpart to the "Why Johnny Can't Read" fad of a few years ago? Typical of the current set of magazine articles on this topic is a recent one appearing in a women's magazine circulated widely through chain store outlets entitled "Is Your Child Too Well-Adjusted?" The bold type introductory paragraph following the title reads: "Be like the others. 'Join the group.' These are the slogans of American parents today, but what is so wonderful about the others, and why must a child join the group? Let him be different. His individuality may be the very thing that will make him into the responsible rebel our

<sup>1</sup>Laurance F. Shaffer. *The Psychology of Adjustment*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1936. p. 138.

world so badly needs."<sup>2</sup> The extent of concern over adjustment as a function of the schools is documented by a recent research bulletin of the National Education Association reporting on "Ten Criticisms of Public Education."<sup>3</sup> The report includes life adjustment education among the ten criticisms leveled at the schools and then goes on to define and clarify the function of such programs and their effects upon the curriculum and the quality of high school graduates.

While it is obvious that the school's role in adjustment is of considerable current interest to parents and educators one is inclined to ask, "But why all the furor?" If adjustment is a necessary, indeed inevitable, element in the education of our children and youth, why so much disagreement over recognizing it as a significant objective of our school curriculum? The answer to this query lies, of course, in the widely different meanings which different persons have attached to the term.

The confusion over the meaning of adjustment has undoubtedly been compounded rather than reduced by the activities of two groups of individuals during recent months. One of these has been that batch of journalists whose primary concern is for getting a story—any kind of story—that will attract readers. Such writers, a small but troublesome lot, have seemingly spent most of their efforts seeking to pose dramatic cleavages rather than working to illuminate and clarify current controversies. They have tended to report on important educational problems in grossly oversimplified terms of an "either-or" nature that are almost in-

evitably unsuited to a world of multiple alternatives and complex relationships. If we would believe some of these high pressure journalistic salesmen, our educational world is clutching and clawing precariously at a giant pendulum swinging back to center from the extreme left. Some of them would have us (as did a feature writer for the *Chicago Tribune*) emerging from a half-century of a child-dominated society and returning at last to a point where parents could once again assert their own rights. It is quite evident that such writers have either kept themselves well insulated from the many incidents observable daily in stores and on sidewalks and busses where irritated and preoccupied parents vent their accumulated tensions upon their offspring; or these writers are simply more concerned with a story than with the facts.

The second group that seems to have confused rather than clarified the general public's understanding of the term "adjustment" as applied to the task of school and home in educating children is that group typified by the Council for Basic Education. In speeches and articles prepared by some of the leadership element in this group, modern schools have been depicted as being largely preoccupied with the task of fitting our youth into neat, predetermined compartments and pigeonholes—this being done in the name of "adjustment." In spite of the attempts by such persons to represent themselves as defenders of the intellectual virtues, they can frequently be found guilty of the rankest kind of anti-intellectualism. They seem to revel in the conversion of many situations involving

<sup>2</sup> Ardis Whitman. *Woman's Day*. September 1958. p. 28-29.

<sup>3</sup> National Education Association, Research Division. *Research Bulletin* 35: 141-48; December 1957.

---

**GEORGE W. DENEMARK** is dean, School of Education, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. He is chairman of the ASCD Commission on Teacher Education.

---

mixed values and multiple alternatives into oversimplified "either-or" choices. They would have us believe that the *only* function of education as conceived by contemporary school administrators and teacher educators is adjustment and that adjustment, to these educators, means *only* conformity. These critics would view concern for adjustment as at the opposite end of the scale from intellectual development and the mortal enemy of the same. Based upon such results one might suspect that the "basic education" of these "thinkers" had been seriously neglected in such areas as critical thinking, logical argument, and ethics.

In seeking to consider and analyze some of the criticisms of adjustment as an objective of education one can find the following shortcomings cited:

1. Adjustment necessarily involves conformity and results in the submergence of the ideas and qualities of each individual to the group or society.

2. Adjustment means a "soft" approach to teaching and learning in which a major concern of the teacher and school program is that of insuring that students are happy and comfortable and are having all of their whims and fleeting interests catered to.

3. Resulting from these characteristics, adjustment inhibits, or perhaps—more strongly—prohibits, creativity of the individual.

4. Adjustment inevitably results in mediocrity and low levels of aspiration because programs and requirements must be pegged at a low level common denominator which, in reaching the ordinary student, fails to tap the resources of the unusually able.

These are serious charges. If they in fact represent the intent, or at best the

unconscious consequence of the school's concern for the adjustment of our children and youth we should undoubtedly make short work of disposing of such a program and philosophy. There are, however, a number of quite different interpretations of the meaning and impact of adjustment. Perhaps it would be well to review some of these in seeking to understand what many educators have been supporting when they speak of adjustment as an important objective of the school. Obviously, there could be little to support in the interpretations we have just enumerated.

### Individuality and Adjustment

In contrast to the belief of some that individuality dies in the process of adjustment to a group there is the conviction of many who would hold that, properly conceived, individuality may come to its fullest fruition in the context of a group or a society. Man is fundamentally a social animal. As pointed out earlier, the prolonged period of helplessness and dependence as an infant and child underlines in fundamental, biological terms that man depends upon other men for his very existence. What might appear at the outset to be a limitation and serious disadvantage of the human infant in comparison with the almost immediate agility and relative independence of other species turns out to be the wellspring of man's real superiority.

It is precisely because of man's lengthy period of development and because his capacities are developed and extended in the process of growth and experience rather than being rigidly confined by predetermined instincts that he may achieve so much. Thus to set up the society or group as the antithesis of the individual is to fly in the face of what we have come to recognize as the real genius

of man, his ability to take advantage of the experience and efforts of others—others both in geographic space and historic time. Man becomes more nearly akin to that which he is capable of becoming, not in spite of his relationships within a society, but *because* of these relationships.

It should be made clear that we are not saying that *any* society or *any* group relationship promotes and extends the individuality of man. Rather, we are maintaining that through those groups, having the appropriate value commitments individuality may flower to a degree that would be impossible in isolation. As John Dewey pointed out in *Democracy and Education*, "A society based on custom will utilize individual variations only up to a limit of conformity with usage. Uniformity is a chief ideal within each class. A progressive society counts individual variations as precious since it finds them the means of its own growth. Hence, a democratic society must, in consistency with its ideal, allow for intellectual freedom and the play of diverse gifts and interests in its educational measure."<sup>4</sup>

In further considering the relationship between adjustment and conformity it would appear that those educators who have long favored the adjustment of the program of the school to fit the varying needs and capacities of the learner are much further away from imposing conformity than are those who would hold that the content of the school program must be inflexible and that it is only the *quantities* of this content which may be varied for different students. As an illustration of this point of view the *Bulletin* of the Council for Basic Education had

<sup>4</sup> John Dewey. *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916. p. 357.

this to say in commenting on Paul Woodring's book, *A Fourth of a Nation*: "One can agree with him when he speaks of the necessity for 'different education for children of differing ability' but if he believes in *education* for all, then he should make clear that the difference must be in degree and not in kind."<sup>5</sup> Rather than building a curriculum to which children and youth must fit themselves as best they can, modern educational theory supports adaptation and modification in *both* school program and learner so as to more properly fit the two together in a way that will provide for the maximum growth of each individual. A look at the facts will disclose that many of those currently engaged in accusing teachers of promoting conformity are themselves firmly committed to a philosophy which amounts to "conform to what we have defined as the essences of a proper education or get out."

### Discipline and Adjustment

In contrast to the belief that concern for adjustment in education amounts to soft pedagogy it should be observed that the most rigorous and demanding forms of discipline are those which individuals impose upon themselves and which arise out of their own convictions and commitments. In Dewey's words, "There is no discipline in the world so severe as the discipline of experience subject to the tests of intelligent development and direction."<sup>6</sup> The easy kind of education is that in which all that is expected of students is that they do what they are told promptly and without question or noise.

Seeking to build into each person a

<sup>5</sup> Council for Basic Education. *CBE Bulletin* 2: 13; December 1957.

<sup>6</sup> John Dewey. *Experience and Education*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944. p. 114.

power of self control based upon personal awareness of the consequences of one's actions is no easy task. Those teachers who have struggled with this objective for their classes will recall that it is in the moments of discouragement and despair over the difficulty of achieving such a goal that they turn to the "easy" ways. One easy way is to leave students with a state of unconcern for the relationship between what they think and do and what happens in the world around them. Another characteristic of soft pedagogy is that which is content simply to stuff young minds with predetermined answers to the problems of life. Again Dewey has much to say about this matter in observing that "The plasticity of the young presents a temptation to those having a greater experience and hence greater power which they rarely resist. It seems putty to be molded according to current designs. . . . When we think of the docility of the young, we first think of the stocks of information adults wish to impose and the ways of acting they want to reproduce. When we think of the insolent coercions, the insinuating bribes, and the pedagogic solemnities by which the freshness of youth can be faded and its vivid curiosities dulled, education becomes an art of taking advantage of the helplessness of the young. . . ."<sup>7</sup>

### Creativity and Adjustment

The tenor of some recent discussions on creativity would seem to imply that creativity in our culture stems principally from those persons markedly out of step with the society. If there is any validity to be found in the comparison of such creativity with the creativity promoted by some of the political and social rebels

<sup>7</sup> John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*. New York: Modern Library, 1922. p. 65.

of our historic past, one could accumulate considerable evidence to the contrary. Several analysts of social and political revolutions occurring since the French Revolution have concluded that the segment of the population that provides the real stimulus for revolution is not the ragged, hungry, dissolute, social outcast group, but rather the much better "adjusted" members of a middle class bourgeoisie. Apparently, such persons have had their basic wants in life sufficiently well met to enable them to give thought and energy to other matters such as social organization and political structure. Such analyses would seem to suggest that a reasonable adjustment of individuals in certain areas of life provides a foundation for the development of creative ideas by those persons in other areas.

A parallel may be seen in the experience of many teachers and school administrators. The teachers who are creative, imaginative, dynamic in their efforts to make learning a truly stimulating intellectual experience for youth are seldom the ones who are fearful, worried, unsure of their status, insecure regarding their own adequacy, or troubled by fears of the irrevocability of a mistake. Rather, the creative teachers are the ones who have built into themselves a substantial measure of security and of self-confidence. The creative teachers are the ones who have come to view their administrative leaders and the organizational structure in which they work as supportive of experimentation and of a research approach to teaching and learning rather than as watchdogs of an inflexible status quo. They are likely to be creative *because* of their effective adjustment to the social environment rather than because of a lack of adjustment. They are likely to be creative because they are in harmony with many aspects of the situation

in which they work rather than because they are at odds with it. They can employ their intellectual talents more fully because they are free from fear.

It is the maladjusted teacher (or youth or parent) who is reluctant to venture into new areas, whose energies are exhausted in attempts to fit in, to say the "right" thing, rather than the adjusted one. Let us keep the record straight on this point. We have turned and shall continue to turn for creative intellectual leadership to those who have achieved a large measure of intellectual freedom because they have built within themselves a self-respect that parallels and undergirds their respect for other human personalities. The kind of concern for adjustment of children and youth that is aimed at building self-confidence and self-respect is a primary support to the development of creative individuality.

### Standards and Adjustment

An intelligent concern for adjustment evidenced in school programs is far more likely to result in raised academic standards than lowered ones. Concern for adjustment is frequently linked with concern for individuals. A school dedicated to a fundamental concern for each student is more likely to be seeking to extend the frontiers of knowledge of each individual than it is to be content with hammering each personality into the mold of an unyielding curriculum—generally one intended for a world of long ago and for a school population markedly different from that enrolled in America's public schools today. Adapting the curriculum of a school to a point where the experiences provided begin to touch the

lives of children and youth and increase their comprehension of the problems they encounter and the decisions they must make rather than fostering mediocrity is much more likely to result in a spirit of initiative and responsibility.

### Adjustability and the Future

It has been suggested in the preceding paragraphs that the root of the current controversy regarding the school's role in the adjustment of our children lies in conflicting understandings of what we mean by adjustment. It was further suggested that adjustment, properly understood, is a necessary aspect of every educational system and runs in the main stream of our finest democratic traditions rather than going counter to them. If, however, the word "adjustment" has taken on so many different meanings as to continue misunderstanding among parents and educators we might do well to adopt as a substitute the word "adjustability."

Gerald Wendt pointed out some advantages of this word when, in the course of his address to the annual conference of the ASCD in St. Louis in 1957, he remarked that our changing world demands a person with built-in *adjustability* rather than adjustment, for the quality must continue through life or otherwise a child adjusted to the mid-twentieth century would be lost in the twenty-first. Whatever the word, adjustment or adjustability, we need to be clear in our conviction that schools must continue to keep focus on individuals and help each of them to deal intelligently and effectively with the important problems of our times and of the years ahead.

Copyright © 1958 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.