

*Needed: A square deal
for pupils of*

The Awkward Age

PUPILS of the awkward age are those youth who stumble on the threshold of adolescence. They are in need of a "square deal" in our schools.

In the first quarter of the 20th Century educators and parents alike were reasonably pleased with the quality of education in grades one through six and in the later years of secondary education. They seriously questioned, however, the effectiveness and appropriateness of education for early adolescents. Among the major factors in such skepticism were (a) an alarming number of drop-outs at about seventh grade level and (b) frequent vehement expressions by students revealing their disapproval of school. It was not unusual to find pupils who had always shown enthusiasm for formal learning suddenly becoming indifferent and even antagonistic toward education. As one might expect, studies of early school leavers almost without exception showed lack of interest to be a chief cause.

Throughout the years because of inadequate understanding and appreciation of early adolescence, inappropriately trained teachers, and impotent teaching methods, the junior high school has been no less than the "tramp steamer of the

educational fleet." If we are to provide educational justice for junior high school youth, it is imperative that we look at (a) those whom we teach, (b) what we teach, (c) how we teach, (d) the setting in which we teach, and (e) those who teach.

Those Whom We Teach

Studies of early adolescents show that the behavior pendulum swings in a far reaching arc from a satisfying maturity to surprising and oft dismaying immaturity. Girls vacillate from BB guns to brasieres and boys from popsicles to motorcycles. Like a house on moving day they exhibit disarray and disorganization, but fortunately this is only a temporary period. The house is at last put in order just as are the lives of early adolescents. To many adults this period on the teeter-totter seems long and unbearable, but to most adolescents it must seem like an eternity of frustrations.

Indeed, most early adolescents are awkward socially, physically and emotionally, although obviously not to the same degree in each sphere. Shoe sizes in a junior high school class may range from 3 to 10, hat sizes from 6 to 7½.

heights from 4'7" to 6'2" and weights from 95 to 195. Too often the unaided eye fails to see similar ranges in interest, drive, ability, aptitude and aspiration.

Physical growth rates are uneven and each individual has his own timetable. Even more complicating perhaps are differences between the sexes. Of course parents and teachers must know these physical growth characteristics of early adolescence—but this knowledge alone is insufficient. Pupils themselves desperately need such knowledge.

Poor posture in rapidly growing youngsters more often than not is the result of a strong desire to be less different and those who would do justice do not harangue on this matter. The guideline is, "if you don't understand them, please don't misunderstand them." The rapidly growing youth frequently requires six meals a day! Just contemplate the multitude of mothers who proclaim, "No eating between meals when I prepare three wholesome and nutritious meals every day!"

In school life youth grow up singly, in twos and threes, in small groups, in large groups and in mass. At this age level—the junior high school years—we find the pupil's social life to be chiefly in twos and threes which we call "chumming," and in a relatively small group known as the "gang." The former educational relationship provides the sense of safety and security, a high priority need of early adolescents. Peer approval is gained from the latter small group relationship. John Carrington, Professor Emeritus of Illinois State Normal University, Normal, Illinois tells this story: "Recently, I was talking with a Bloomington man who told me how angry he often became with his early adolescent daughter. This time, it seems she had been hounding her father for a pair of buckskin sneakers to

wear to school. He finally broke down and bought the shoes but much to his chagrin he caught the girl in the backyard scouring mud into the shoes with a brush before they had been worn the first time." Approval of peers is needed!

Other desires of these young people include parent approval and opportunities to be alone. The "early adolescent" wants very much to try his hand at some decision-making, but only with parental guidance in the background. At this developmental stage he doesn't want complete freedom, just parental blessing as he strives to control his own drives and behavior. Neither rigid supervision nor extreme neglect is effective as the strategy of parental and teacher guidance.

Most 12- to 15-year-olds have strong emotions. Expression and restraint of such intense feelings create real problems for the youngster as well as for those around him. Usually, the object is neither to stifle emotional expression nor to fan its embers. Reasonable emotional balance is the target.

Full intellectual maturity commonly occurs by age 15. Curiosity, yes! Enthusiasm, yes! Whether the experience of teaching such pupils is delight or drudgery depends pretty much upon the psychological organization of the teacher and his teaching approach.

What We Teach

Obviously, content must be adapted to the nature of the organism described earlier. If a balance of work, rest and play is indicated; let us not then insist on a preponderance of work, at least not for those who falter on such a regimen.

An emphasis on general education in the junior high school as a sequence in an integrated program, kindergarten through grade twelve, is desirable. If

this goal is not attainable in a practical sense, then certainly we need to integrate the program of learning experiences in grades seven through nine. The word integration is used here in its broadest meaning—not mere integration of learning experiences within the classroom, but also from grade to grade and from subject to subject. Integration of personality, too, is implied.

In the junior high school, pupils learn attitudes, ways of behaving, social skills, knowledge, habits and appreciations. They learn from what is taught, how it is taught, those who teach and from the setting in which instruction occurs. If we view the school as one of several social agencies organized, as a controlled and structured environment, to augment the child's natural environment, certainly we can see that the point of take-off is to be found in the life problems of learners, not necessarily in a chapter of a textbook.

How We Teach

Problems of learning are seldom, if ever, solved through organization. The teacher and his methods make the difference! Earlier it was pointed out that the child learns something from the behavior of the teacher. For example, he may learn patience or the lack of it. He may acquire enthusiasm, apathy or inertia. Enthusiasm and optimism are contagious to about the same degree as lethargy and pessimism. He who would teach junior high school youth must possess other unique qualities but suffice it to say that

a worthy model for emulation is a vital element in the enterprise to insure the "square deal." One frustrated lad was heard to remark, "Two things in life I've had are ample—good advice and bad example." Unfortunately, our youth do get good advice in ladles and good examples in teaspoons.

The methods used by the teacher should grow out of his efforts to translate principles of learning into actual practice. All too frequently, I fear, junior high school teachers are unmindful of what we know about learning and how it occurs. I would suggest that at least twice each school year some attention should be given through the in-service educational program to learning theory and its implications. Learning and growing are personal but teachers can aid the process with assiduous application of methods which nourish the organism.

Among the methods which appear to acknowledge best the nature of young adolescents are pupil participation in planning, use of resource and experience units, use of community resources, the problems approach, and small group activities. Judicious use of the above methods and techniques requires considerable planning on the part of the teacher; consequently, there are many who cling to the assign-question-recite pattern of instruction.

Ministering to the unique needs of individual early adolescents is one of the real challenges to the junior high school. For some the path to adolescence and adulthood is relatively smooth and direct; for others it is bumpy and torturous. Dick *may be* a problem child but he likely isn't totally responsible for the label. When Dick has a problem, which is perhaps a more accurate statement of the situation, the triad of home-school-community has a problem—that of help-

M. Dale Baughman is Assistant Professor of Education, University of Illinois, Urbana; and is Consultant, Junior High School Association of Illinois and the Junior High School Principals Association of Illinois.

ing Dick solve his problem, because it grew by the nurture of environmental conditions.

The Setting in Which We Teach

The quality of instruction is more important than the type of organization, still the latter deserves consideration as one studies the setting for the teaching-learning process. With few exceptions educators today agree that some form of junior high school organization is superior to the traditional 8-4 plan. In the absence of experimental evidence, principals', teachers' and pupils' judgments have to be relied upon to identify the most desirable grade organization. The 6-3-3 pattern appears to have the edge in educational soundness in spite of the fact that the 6-6 division is rapidly gaining in popularity, especially in small cities and towns. Popular opinion would limit the junior high school enrollment to not less than 300 and not more than 900. The six-period and the seven-period day are most common.

We are now hearing cries of "toughen up" and "beef up" as teachers feel pressure to urge, prod, cajole and drive their pupils. Let us not, however, buy our results at too high a price; let us take care not to crowd out the bluegrass of creativity and individual dignity with the crabgrass of conformity and the single standard. It takes time for a boy or girl to grow! The "square deal" includes activities for these youths on the threshold of adolescence. We're not quite ready to trade in the choir robe for a Roman toga.

Most people with a stake in junior high school education agree that the major purpose of the school building is to house and implement the instructional program. It is readily obvious, however, that such close agreement does not exist

on the part of parents, educators and non-parents when one goes beyond the fundamental axiom expressed in the preceding sentence. Educators, for example, are apt to emphasize instructional adequacy, parents demand safety and healthful conditions, and taxpayers insist on economy.

Few there are who question the wide range of criteria by which facilities are judged, and seldom do we expect the architect to observe in all of its implications each principle of construction and design. Nevertheless, design principles such as the following¹ are generally agreed upon:

- safety
- health
- instructional adequacy
- economy
- flexibility
- expansibility
- aesthetics.

Over the years the junior high school housing story has been a sad one. Typically, new junior high school physical plants have been patterned after senior high schools. The literature is nearly devoid of recommendations and research evidence relative to the most appropriate building facilities for accommodating an educational program for young adolescents.

The time is past due for investigation into more detailed design and construction techniques for building the school homes for our pupils of the awkward age. Room sizes and shapes may need different planning; certainly such areas as shops, arts and crafts rooms, home economics laboratories, general science rooms, and general music rooms require planning of a different kind than for

¹ *Educational Specifications for Junior High Schools*, Denver Public Schools, Denver, Colorado.

senior high schools. Counseling and conference rooms seating 8 to 15 people are popular in many schools. Usually, they are found between large rooms of 1100 plus square feet where "block-time" classes are held.

Those Who Teach

In general, state certification requirements allow a teacher prepared and authorized to teach one or more subjects in high school to teach those same subjects in any grade of the junior high school. In most states teachers trained for the elementary grades may teach in grades seven and eight and sometimes in grade nine. Such teachers are not required to gain a better understanding of the early adolescent or of the history, purposes and functions of the junior high school. Indeed, the same requirement for senior high school teaching, subject matter specialty, is the criterion in use for employment in the junior high school.

Is the competency to teach a general competency? There is room for discussion but even if it is, we seldom expect the primary teacher to perform equally well as a teacher in the high school; neither do we assign the high school teacher to the primary grades and then demand effective results. The junior high school which is a unit in the vertical ladder desperately needs junior high school teachers, and just as desperately it needs to rid itself of those transitional teachers who are on the elevator "up" or the toboggan "down."

One hopeful sign is the present inclination on the part of state departments of education to study the possibilities of special certification for junior high school teachers. Another is the tendency for more and more teacher education institutions to give serious thought to a some-

what different pattern of preparatory experiences for future junior high school teachers. Experienced junior high school teachers and junior high school principals tend to agree on certain elements of the professional educational requirements for junior high school teachers. These elements are: diagnosis and treatment of reading problems; guidance; psychology of early adolescence; methods of teaching in the junior high school; history, philosophy and functions of junior high school education; and student teaching in the junior high school.

Critics of the junior high school idea, both those in higher education and those on the firing line, have long harped on the failure of the junior high school to provide effective articulation between the elementary school and the secondary school. They claim, and rightly so, that a need for better articulation was one of the prime reasons for the birth of the junior high school idea. Strangely enough, these same critics have neglected to aid the worthy cause of selecting, preparing and improving teachers for those pupils in transition from childhood to adulthood.

An old Talmudic legend tells of a heathen who once approached Hillel—that ancient and well known rabbi—and said to him, "I will convert to Judaism if you will tell me what it is about while I stand on one foot." Hillel in all his cleverness, replied, "The whole of Judaism is that thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

I claim not the cleverness of Hillel but if I were asked to tell what the junior high school idea is about while my skeptic interrogator stood on one foot, I would say simply, "The whole of the junior high school idea is that it attempts to give a square deal to pupils of the awkward age."

Copyright © 1960 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.