

Growing Up in America

Harold D. Drummond

IN 1962, the Bureau of the Census estimated that more than 73 million young people less than twenty years of age were growing up in the United States of America.¹ To state the fact another way, almost four out of every ten persons in this land are of or below school age. These youngsters are the "citizens of tomorrow"—the persons who gradually will take over leadership responsibilities, and continue the progress toward the Great American Dream or permit that vision to fade and wither.

Several years ago as the Commission on Elementary Curriculum of ASCD was beginning its work, many members of the Association were asked to indicate problems of concern in elementary education which they thought were of such magnitude that the Commission should devote some study to them. Numerous ideas were suggested—agreement on one was overwhelming: "Pressures on Children." The following year, a series of one-day drive-in conferences was held in three sections of the country: San Francisco, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C. At these conferences, Edward Greenwood of the Menninger Clinic and Thomas Gladwin of the National Institute of Mental Health presented papers on this topic—one from the view-

point of a psychiatrist, the other from the viewpoint of a social anthropologist. Their participation was made possible through NIMH support.

Although considerable time has elapsed since that initial effort to get school leaders aroused about what is happening to youngsters in our culture, the problem of pressures is still with us. This issue of *Educational Leadership* is, in a real sense, an outgrowth of the interest and work of the Commission on Elementary Curriculum although only one person of the current membership is represented in the articles which follow. Commission Members and the current Chairman, J. Murray Lee of Southern Illinois University, urged the Publications Committee to plan and prepare this special issue on "Changing Childhood and Youth." As you will see, the issue is devoted to the young people of America and to an assessment of the conditions under which they are growing up.

Recurring Themes

Several recurring themes pervade the articles which follow. No doubt, there are some additional common elements, but the following seem apparent and important:

1. *Pressures on children and youth are mounting.* This proposition is so

¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1963*. (Eighty-fourth edition.) Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963. p. 28.

obviously valid that little documentation is required. No previous generation of young people has had to live under the constant threat of almost instantaneous destruction. Now, our whole civilization—life as we know it on this planet—can be extinguished. Children growing up under the shadow of burgeoning mushroom clouds need security; and yet, because of other pressures, we sometimes fail to be sufficiently aware of this need.

Pressures on young people from parents and other adults are mounting, too. Many of these pressures may be most wholesome—but there is a thin line of demarcation between the pressure which the individual needs for wholesome development and the pressure which is debilitating. Pressures which tend to produce more concern with marks rather than with learning, or with scores on a particular multiple-choice examination rather than with knowledge, are unwholesome. With each passing year the knowledge explosion multiplies—and pressures mount.

Moreover, mass communications, especially the television networks, seem to demand and appear to get more and more of the time of youngsters—time which may or may not be profitably spent in front of the set. The “tube” represents almost constant pressure—to buy a certain product, to try an “adult” habit, to act “tough” with other human beings, to conform to a particular stereotype of dress and behavior. Children and youth growing up in America, obviously, are doing so in a time of mounting pressures—some wholesome and desirable—some destructive and objectionable.

2. *Physical living space is dwindling rapidly.* The population explosion on this planet has been well-documented in recent years. Never before has there been so much competition for the avail-

able resources of Mother Earth or so much pollution of the air and water necessary for healthful living. Life expectancy at birth in the United States was 54.1 years in 1920.² Forty years later, in 1960, life expectancy at birth was 69.7 years. Increased life expectancy, combined with the birth of more than four million babies a year in each of the past several years, has lessened living space in the United States. In 1920, for instance, the nation had an average of 29.9 persons per square mile. In 1960 the comparable figure was 50.5. Such averages, of course, tend to cover up obvious population pressures. The State of Alaska, for instance, had only .4 persons per square mile in 1960 (up from .1 in 1920); and Nevada had only 2.6 persons per square mile. By contrast, Rhode Island had, in 1960, 812.4 persons per square mile; New Jersey had 806.7 persons per square mile; and the District of Columbia had 12,523.9!

A century ago, on the frontier, self-reliance and independence of action were essential for survival. Today, however, even in the sparsely populated states of Alaska and Nevada, almost every person relies on others for his food, clothing, income, and welfare. I do not decry the fact that we are more interdependent today than ever before in human history—I simply record the fact. Almost every American depends for his food on the farmers, the canners and freezers, the truckers and railroad men, the wholesalers and retailers. We would starve without them. So, too, with other aspects of life. Increasingly, we are from necessity less self-reliant and more interdependent.

Increasingly, too, we are city dwellers. In 1960, according to the Bureau of the Census, more than 179 million people

² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

lived in the United States.³ Of these, almost 113 million people or almost two-thirds of us lived in 212 Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas. These areas are defined as "a county or group of contiguous counties (except in New England) which contain at least one city of 50,000 inhabitants or more or 'twin cities' with a combined population of at least 50,000. . . . In New England, towns and cities are the units used. . . ."⁴

Such trends inevitably mean fewer opportunities for young Americans to explore the great out-of-doors, fewer opportunities to swim in nature's swimsuit in the "old swimmin' hole," more compulsion for behavior consonant with apartment-house living and city streets swarming with automobiles and trucks.

3. *Simultaneously, "vision" space is rapidly expanding.* No previous generation of youngsters on this planet could with some confidence think and dream of exploring another planet. Today's youngsters not only think and dream of such possibilities, they confidently *plan* to do so. Where only a few years ago our "vision" was limited to what the eye could see, we now utilize electronic microscopes and instruments of incredible complexity to look inside matter. We explore the secret of life itself inside the living cell. And we look beyond our solar system to other systems in our own galaxy and to other galaxies stretching beyond the "vision" of the dreamiest fan of Buck Rogers a generation ago.

Rapid transportation and communication, too, have tremendously increased our "vision" space. A generation ago many youngsters entering school had never been outside the county in which they were born. Today, many youngsters come to school having been around

the world, or having lived in several different countries.

If ever man's creative genius was stifled by lack of unknowns which he could attempt to understand, certainly that problem no longer exists. Each new discovery opens new vistas to view. Each new theoretical construct—proven or waiting for verification—stretches before us vast additional possibilities. The vision of a world in which all men live together in peace, freedom and justice under law remains unachieved. Progress toward that goal, however, has been and continues to be made. Each achievement of worth opens for the social scientist, as for the physical and biological scientists, new possibilities. Perhaps one of the best ways of describing the situation in which mankind now finds itself is that this era is truly one of "vision unlimited." The gap between that which is envisioned and that which is achieved adds additional pressures and strains to modern living.

4. *The gap may be widening between a fascinating world of learning outside school and consistently followed routines within.* For at least a quarter of a century—from about 1925 to 1950—school was the most interesting place in the community for a youngster to be. No other place offered as many exciting learning possibilities. In many classrooms today, however, school work is probably pretty dull and dreary, compared to Captain Kangaroo, Mr. Wizard, and Roy Rogers.

We can, of course, rationalize that schoolwork inevitably will be less exciting than dramatic productions staged for entertainment. We might salve our consciences a bit by reminding ourselves that there always have been poor teachers. The fact remains—learning opportunities for children and youth outside

³ *Ibid.*, p. 13-18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

of school have been expanded enormously in recent years, capitalizing in the main on their interests. Have school programs kept pace? I think not.

5. *Educational problems of vast proportions are concentrated in slum areas of major cities.* School experiences and out-of-school living probably are at variance for many youngsters growing up in middle class communities; the conflict is of special significance for children and youth in slums. School problems stack up for numerous reasons in urban slums: lack of living space; low educational level and aspiration level of parents; higher rates of illegitimacy; more children growing up in homes with only one parent; less parental concern for children; much more unsupervised play time without adequate play space; lack of club or Scout or church activities; heightened tension between racial groups in changing neighborhoods, etc.⁵ Children and youth coming to school from such areas frequently find school learning not to be important in terms of out-of-school living. The value conflict is too great for many of them, and they wind up on the streets, unprepared for anything except a life of unemployment compensation and/or crime.

No simple solution exists, of course, for such almost insurmountable educational problems. In looking at "Changing Childhood and Youth," however, one is forced to the conclusion that we must somehow muster our resources more effectively to produce total communities which educate. Certainly attempting *education* in school while the rest of the community, to a certain extent, *miseducates* results in the ineffectiveness and heightened pressures we are presently experiencing.

⁵ See James B. Conant, *Slums and Suburbs*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1961.

6. *Many other tough educational problems exist in other areas, too.* Education in urban slum areas must be improved markedly and rapidly, but these areas are not the only ones in which educational problems exist. Many youngsters, even today, are growing up in communities which are so isolated and so small that it is difficult if not practically impossible to provide a good educational program. Some youngsters attend schools which are practically torn apart by tension and strife between rival factions of the community and/or the school staff. Some youngsters are in classrooms with teachers who themselves have never developed deep-seated intellectual interests.

Outmoded and outdated instructional materials are still provided in many schools—materials which build stereotypes, narrow vision, or block understanding. Too many teachers, principals, supervisors, and curriculum directors seem inclined to be bandwagon riders, and too many seem willing to accept almost any simple answer to complicated instructional problems. The task of developing in youngsters better attitudes toward other human beings still is not well-understood or accomplished.

American education is not a national failure, nor is it an unqualified success. The future can be bright, but complacency now will result in eventual darkness. Perhaps we need, again, to ask ourselves some tough, hard questions as we look at "Changing Childhood and Youth":

How can schools best develop young people who are tough enough to take the pressures of modern life?

What can schools do, effectively, to help develop total communities which educate?

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selves effectively to the question of meeting the needs of our children as we enter the Space Age. But the great educational task lying ahead cannot be done by school people alone. It will require a mobilization of all societal forces which have the power to influence, for only through the combined efforts of a community's total resources can a concept of education be perpetuated that is dynamic enough to insure the survival of a democratic society in a free America.

Supervision Experiment—Downing

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coordinator demonstration and intervention were frequent during the first months of the project, they have decreased steadily as teacher security and competence have grown. This writer believes that three factors have contributed to this success. First, there is no substitute for actual demonstration of methodology in its natural context and at an appropriate time. Second, it was found possible to provide this instruction in a manner which did not diminish the professional stature of the teacher. Finally, the relationship of the coordinator to the teachers was supportive rather than threatening, since she has an evaluative rather than a rating function. Her role, in large part, is one of leading the teacher to examine his own successes and failures and to strive for higher professional competence.

Observed Results

We have now passed the halfway mark of our project. Our teachers are no longer raw recruits, but are tried veterans of an exhausting campaign. They have shown impressive growth in their understanding of disadvantaged adolescents. They have become increasingly

proficient in teaching techniques, skilled at the adaptation of subject matter, and creative in finding and in developing materials of instruction. Because, in the inevitable moments of exhaustion and frustration, the members of the team have relied constantly upon each other for support and for understanding, group loyalty and solidarity have developed steadily. The long range relationship with our pupils and awareness of their tremendous needs have produced in our teachers a strong devotion to the children.

Of course, the true measure of our work will be made in the future. Only then will we learn whether, as a concomitant to building professional competence, we have succeeded in developing commitment to this vital teaching task.

Editorial—Drummond

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What can we of this generation do to free the minds and capacities of the current crop of youngsters so that they will be more able and more willing to cope with the problems of their day than we seem to be with ours?

Now is not the time to turn our backs on the underlying basis of American education—local boards of education. Neither is it a time to worship ineffectual idols of a departed past, such as a nine-month school term. We need to continue in our land—through discussion and dialogue and action—the quest for better communities, including better schools, so that growing up in America will result in fewer casualties and many more successes.

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