



TODAY'S JUNIOR HIGH STUDENTS



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IT IS always hazardous to compare any age group with its counterpart in times past. In every generation, adults see in young adolescents a frightening assortment of contrasts with "the way kids were when we were their age." It is all too easy to react emotionally to newspaper headlines or to the noisy jostling at the school entrance.

If we attempt to resist stereotyped thinking and to be objective, there seem to be three major ways in which today's younger adolescents differ from those of previous generations:

1. Thanks to better nutrition, they do mature somewhat earlier.
2. Thanks to better education, they know more and have greater intellectual sophistication.
3. No thanks to a combination of causal factors, they are more dichotomized than any previous generation. It is this difference, its causes, and possible educational implications which will be the topic of this article.

In almost every generation of which we have knowledge there has been a tendency for young adolescents to adopt fads which set them apart from "little

kids" on the one hand and adults on the other. Although not all were affected with equal intensity by the fads, and although the fads could be in many areas—language usage, clothing, dance patterns, and social customs—nevertheless at any one time in any one area there was likely to be a single fad.

The In's—The Out's

What has happened that is relatively new is that today there tend to be *two* fads, each picked up by a different group. In many American schools, we have on the one hand a group of youngsters who are "in." They tend to follow somewhat sophisticated clothing styles. The terms by which they are identified vary from community to community and from year to year. Typical are "varsity," "Sosh," "Frats," "Ivy," and "Tweeds."

The contrasting group of youngsters, for whom the very names are indicative, may be known as "grease," "hoods," "trolls," etc., and are likely to consist of visibly alienated youth. The boys are likely to combine a markedly feminine appearance with clothes that make them look like tough characters. The girls may adopt outlandish hairdos and extreme clothing styles.

This dichotomizing of the youth population is by no means solely an American phenomenon. Its appearance in England, for example, led to combat between the "Mods" and the "Rockers."

What is of fundamental concern is that this dichotomy seems to be but a surface manifestation of the fact that the disparities among our youth are increasing. It is possible that as programs launched under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 take hold, these disparities may be reduced. Nevertheless, at the present moment these divergencies are so much a fact that we must seek for causes and solutions.

One factor probably has to do with the size of our educational units. Although big schools make for some advantages in specialized offerings and specialist teachers, they also can lead to impersonal handling. In small units, every boy or girl has a role, an active role. As shown in the Barker and Gump studies, *Big School; Small School*, in large units many pupils have to be a passive audience for the active "in's." It is not surprising, then, that as a general rule throughout the United States dropout rates are lowest in small schools and tend to rise with the size of the school.

We cannot forget, either, that many children come from homes where parents are treated impersonally in large plants or stores or, if marginal, must spend hours receiving impersonal attention from doctors in overcrowded clinics and relief workers in overworked agencies.

If you are a "nobody," then you can make yourself a "somebody" by being obnoxious. There may be some link to note in the fact that Hell's Angels ride the roads of the state most enamored of computerized schools. A key educational task, then, is to devise educational arrangements under which every boy and girl can be a valued member of a continuing face-to-face group. There are many ways in which this can be done: we can build smaller schools, break big

schools into house units, launch many special programs, expand the range of cocurricular activities. At the very least we can stare down the enthusiasts who think social problems can be solved by supermarket education dished out in monstrous "educational parks."

Different Emphasis

Another causal factor is that as the educational requirements for entry occupations go up and up, the junior high school student who cannot take the pressure to get ready for college, sees less and less value in the school he attends. Occupationally, it leads nowhere. He sees it as preparatory (for what?); terminal for nothing.

Let us study closely the attitudes of the youngsters with low achievement motivation, the boys and girls who will drop out, the ones who find more glory in "going grease" than in any adult-approved motivation. Here we note two qualities which pose problems for schools: (a) they are not motivated by future gratifications; and (b) they place little value on individuality.

One could well argue that they ought not to be that way, that we should do something to prevent such an outcome. Perhaps we should. (There is a legitimate value issue which can be argued; the author believes that people have a right to live with emphasis on the present if they wish and he has enough nonconformity in him to defend conformity if it is freely selected.)

Regardless of that, however, we have no tried-and-true program which would turn all children into future-oriented self-actualizers. Ergo, the youngsters, with their values and inclinations, are with us. That is a fact many school people have tried to ignore. With pride in our own values, we vaunt programs that inculcate personal uniqueness and organize instruction for distant goals.

Difficult as it is to question precious beliefs and long-admired practices, we must do so. We have grown comfortable, for example, with the classroom procedures which call for children and adolescents to work long periods of time gathering information for reports which are then presented to a class for discussion. Teachers, who value the self-purposing and creative young people, will praise, as a matter of course, the stellar classroom performer who exemplifies exactly those qualities.

The Pendulum

In every class, and especially in junior high schools, there are some boys and girls who hang back, who do not enter discussions, which they leave for those who "talk smart." Without giving the matter too much thought we assume that those young people we praise will serve as models of identification for their classmates, whom we surmise hunger for approval.

In schools serving underprivileged areas, we consider class reactions to these strategies as problems in discipline. Yet, is it not equally possible that by adopting routines which go against the grain of many young people, we are really increasing their alienation from school? Methods which do not respect the

behavioral inclinations of students fly in the face of our value for individualizing instruction every bit as much as does refusal to take into account the differences in intellectual ability.

Observations such as the above are too often taken as implying a sweeping reversal of instructional trends. The argument goes that if an author says that "democratic" procedures do not work well with the alienated segments of our youth, then he means we must use autocratic procedures. The facts are thus utilized to bolster an all-or-none approach, one way or another.

What we are saying here is that incontestable realities indicate that our current procedures in junior high schools simply are not reaching significant numbers of students. It is equally uncontestable that they *are* effectively reaching many more. The solution, then, on the one hand, calls for retention and improvement of those practices for those whom they benefit; on the other hand, there is clear need to find some way to meet the needs of those who are being alienated.

How can this be done? One possibility is for teachers to individualize instruction or subgroup classes so that different processes can be geared to the psychological needs of the children or young people. Let the self-propelling pupils work in their own ways creatively to reach long-range goals; give the self-doubters the security of definite assignments. A second possibility is to group together the now alienated youth and have teachers work with them intensively to develop appropriate approaches.

We can no longer afford to deal with educational problems by swings of the pendulum. We should know by now that any approach if applied to all children alike will be bad for some. There is no solution but to deal with each boy or girl in terms of his or her characteristics understood in depth. This is especially the case at the junior high school level, where individual differences of all sorts are most visible.

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