SCHOOL professionals and lay citizens alike seem to have a new awareness that the varieties of discontent coming from secondary school students can no longer be simply dismissed as normal adolescent grumbling. Although the vocal and articulate criticism of a minority is disturbing in itself, the real seriousness of the situation may be indicated by the tacit support this criticism receives from the great majority of students who pursue their studies without disruption.

As innovations in curriculum and administrative organization have been implemented to provide a more exacting and stimulating school experience, educators have been faced with increasing demands from students for some sense of relevance and commitment in their education. This is surely one of the more intriguing ironies of our professional progress these past 15 years.

Perhaps even more bothersome to teachers and administrators who see students in the daily context of school life is the behavior exhibited by students whose school experience seems to be shot through with boredom or trivia. If there are differences in style and temperament in ASCD's *The Junior High School We Saw*¹ and Frederick Wiseman's *High School*,² the real substance of both works is similar. The sense of purpose which should characterize learning is too often absent in the hour-to-hour, day-to-day life of the school, even for students acculturated to middle-class, future-oriented expectations of schooling.

From varying vantage points, scholars and critics of the schools have constructed a number of hypotheses which purport to explain the complexities of this situation. Yet the problem still remains for school professionals to decide what is within their control and influence and to take constructive action. Certainly, if there are conditions in school life which are damaging to students' dignity and growth of self-worth, as Edgar Friedenberg has suggested, we should take steps to create a context for learning which fosters autonomy and personal integrity. I sense, however, that the school is failing most seriously and pervasively in its really fundamental task of instruction. When students are bored or irritated, they are likely to be so in class. When they become sullen or angry with their school experience, we might ask ourselves why they fail to find something challenging in the program we have worked to provide.

My proposal here is that schools fail to transmit to students a sufficient sense of the value or worth of what they are learning. I suspect that teachers and other curriculum decision makers are overlooking one aspect of recent developments in curriculum theory


and instruction, and that is that many of the most contemporary and prestigious curricular innovations are highly conservative in their structure. In science, mathematics, social studies, and English, much of what is presented as "new" is a reversion to the secondary school subject as a purely academic discipline.

The structure we talk about in reference to the new programs is the mode of inquiry and fundamental concepts and principles of the subject as it comes to us from its academic practitioners. Less and less is the structure of what we teach being thought of in terms of adapting the discipline to the previous learning or interest of students or of helping them perceive its social or aesthetic or vocational value.

This is not a plea for a triumphant return to cookbook science or bits of this or that in the social studies or humanities. New curricula in these areas have made impressive claims for updating content and for the rigor of scholarly experience which they can bring to students, and these should be thoroughly tested out. Yet we might ask ourselves if we are taking sufficient care to help students see the worth of their subject area studies separately or taken together.

**Reasonable Success**

Unfortunately, "life adjustment" education in its extremes gave a bad odor to efforts to build opportunities for learning experiences in terms of the expanding experiences and understanding of students. The clock will not turn back, and few hope that it will, but the relevance of learning may not be apparent to those human enterprises which are or ever will be directly within the student's experience.

Students need to feel some progress in their personal growth, as surely as they need some reasonable kind of success in their day-to-day work. When they have this—and I think adolescents are acutely aware of their growth as persons—then some of the frustrations of everyday endeavors can be handled. Where the student does not feel that somehow he is a more substantial person than he was last year, then no cataloging of the school's superb facilities or expansive offerings will answer his criticism that somehow he has been left out of the whole business.

School policy makers at all levels need to make curriculum plans which not only enable the learner to assume control over a body of knowledge and skills, but also give the learner an articulate sense of the worth and meaning of this learning. The student must know not only that he knows some math and some science and some history, but that what he knows has some value for him in our social or vocational enterprises or in his enlarged conception of what it means to be a human being.

Young professionals within the universities and public school systems especially bear a heavy responsibility in revitalizing our concern for the learner as a person. Some of them are young enough to remember the frustrations of being on the other side of the desk when the human purposes of learning were rarely apparent. Many of them have recent experience teaching in situations where the total context of school life was too often imitative to their students' needs and best interests. To meet the urgent problems of the present, those with fresh dedication can use the accumulated experience of American education to suggest new proposals for the task of making learning as exciting and as fulfilling as they know it can be.

Those who will shortly assume leadership positions in graduate schools, teacher education programs, and in elementary and secondary schools have an opportunity to bring new talents and energy to this task. The colleges and universities, especially, can make their contribution by integrating into teacher education and graduate study programs a knowledgeable and humane concern for young learners as persons. The scholarly expertise which institutions of higher education possess can be shared with future school professionals in illuminating the social and psychological contexts of learning. The accumulation of examined experience which develops will be a resource for the total enterprise of educating.