

Disaffected Youth: Selected Comments

Disaffected youth, a topic of concern for all ASCD'ers, is a label that encompasses many young people including the handicapped, the obese, and the gifted. Following are excerpts from a few manuscripts considered by Educational Leadership that discuss these special youngsters.

The Changing Face of Mental Retardation *

Mentally retarded youth are estranged and isolated from the main body of society. Their disaffection arises from different sources in relating to the current dominant culture than the disaffection of youth with other problems. Mentally retarded youth are isolated by neglect and exclusion as they fall behind the pace of development demanded by dominant forces in society. Even today, most lay citizens and many educators hold to myths and artifacts about mental retardation that foster continued separation and the resulting disaffection of individuals who are mentally handicapped.

Dramatic and potentially far-reaching shifts have taken place in the field of mental retardation during the last six or seven years. Three related concepts—*normalization* (Wolfensberger, 1972), *the developmental model* (Roos, in press; Roos, McCann, & Patterson, 1970a, 1970b), and an increased concern for the *human rights* of the retarded (National Advisory Committee on the Handicapped, 1974, 1975, 1976)—have combined to give impetus to profound changes in the field of mental retardation.

It is clear that educational administrators, curriculum directors, and regular classroom teachers will become increasingly responsible for

educating retarded youth. In fact, it is probable that these specialists will soon be unable to function in their rapidly changing roles unless they have substantial understanding of and ability to work with retarded persons.

The field of mental retardation is undergoing rapid change. The decade of the 1970's has been marked by (1) increased concern for the legal rights of the retarded, (2) a move away from institutionalization and toward community-based programs, (3) attempts to educate the public regarding the needs of the retarded, (4) attempts to identify and remediate problems among "high-risk" infants, (5) increased effort to educate retarded persons in regular classrooms, and (6) a change in the official definition of retardation. Fewer persons with mental handicaps are being placed in institutions; more are remaining in the community and attending regular schools. In fact, the schools will very likely be the facet of our society that will ultimately determine the success of recent innovations in the care and education of the retarded. The success of integrating handicapped children will be determined by the

* A complete copy of this article may be obtained by writing the authors.

teacher's ability and willingness to relate to and deal with retarded children. Attitudes of the general public toward the retarded may be largely influenced* through personal experiences with these children in a school setting. Shotel, Iano, and McGettigan (1972) have noted that many teachers are apprehensive about their ability to function in a mainstreamed class. Certainly special training at both the preservice and in-service levels must be provided. In a real way, retarded persons are dependent upon our schools in the determination of their quality of life. The extent to which schools can and/or will respond is yet to be seen. We feel that the prognosis is good!

ET

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Obesity: A School's Concern

The public schools of the United States must assume responsibility in helping to provide for those students who are emotionally and physically handicapped by the crippler, *obesity*—a disease that is never listed as a cause of death in any obituary column, but a disease that is a causative factor of death-producing diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, and heart attack—a plight often considered worse than death. Education for other handicapped students has been implemented by those who felt a re-

sponsibility to speak out for others who could not speak out for themselves.

Being a person who fought the obesity battle, and who daily fights to keep the disease under control, I too feel compelled to write for those who are hurt too deeply to cry out for help. People afflicted with obesity are usually emotionally handicapped, as well as physically handicapped; they are unable to vocalize their need for help because to do so would only deepen the hurt and spread the disease that seeks to devour their

very existence. If this approach seems evangelistic, it is intended to be. I know the problems, the aches, the utter despair. I know that the schools must be the leaders in conquering this disease that consumes fifteen to twenty percent of adolescents in the United States¹ and promises continued destruction to their lives at odds of twenty-eight to one if the problem is not corrected during adolescence.²

By ignoring the needs of the obese, some "educators," as well as society in general, have displayed the attitude that all an obese person has to do is take a diet sheet and exercise some self-control. The solution is not that simple, and society is a contributing factor to the problem. Society subtly projects its message that fun and food are synonymous. Advertising depicts the good life as one of eating, eating, eating. Food is the primary reward offered for acceptable behavior, for successful performance. Then society, utilizing its double standard, expresses contempt for the person who hears the message to eat, eat, eat, but who exceeds the feed limit. Society designs clothes for the thin—clothes that reveal all the bulges. It coins ugly names such as "Fatso," "Fatty," "Pig," "Blob," and "Blimp" to convey its disdain—words that forever echo in the ears of the child being addressed. Teachers, according to Dr. Milan Pazourek, contribute to the problem by ignoring fat children and not encouraging them to participate in activities. This lack of recognition contributes to their feelings of inferiority.³

Although obesity is a problem for children of all ages, this article is concerned primarily with adolescents. Adolescence is a crucial period when young persons become increasingly aware of body development. The problem is critical for obese girls because, instead of developing curves in the right places, they develop bulges in almost all places, bulges that are enhanced by teen fashions. For both the male and the female, the insecurities of social relations are tremendous. The boy is afraid of rejection if he asks a girl for a date; the girl knows that she is not asked to school functions because she is fat. Oddly, fat people are not attracted to each other. To be fat is bad; to be fat and date a fat person is worse. Emotions stemming from heartbreaking experiences have given birth to desires to commit suicide, according

to David L. Snow and Mark L. Held.⁴ Feelings of rejection, loneliness, and absence of satisfying relationships with others are byproducts of obesity that produce a desire to commit suicide. This route appears to be the only avenue of escape. Schools must help to alleviate this desire.

What should the schools do? First, maybe we should consider what they should *not* do. No teacher, from first grade upward, should encourage children to eat all the food on their plates. Children should quit eating when they want to; a child's metabolism gives signals when sufficient intake has been made. Second, schools should not sell cokes and confectionaries to students. They could sell sugar-free beverages and fruit juices instead. Third, schools should not require all students to eat the same lunch. If some students want to eat hotdogs, hamburgers, pizzas, and potatoes, let them, *but* provide tuna fish, salads, and other easy-to-fix, low-calorie foods for the child whose body can ill-afford the starches. State department lunch personnel generally recommend diversity in menus.

Specifically, all schools should give careful consideration to these procedures that may be followed:

1. Each classroom should contain several desks that are larger than those normally required for the age group served in this classroom.
2. Schools should attempt to schedule fat students together as much as possible for physical education classes.
3. Teachers should get to know obese students, their interests, areas in which they excel. Then the teacher should encourage the students to share their accomplishments with the class.
4. Teachers can provide opportunity for all students to learn to accept the obese child. Teachers should present information on obese persons, such as Winston Churchill, Theodore Roosevelt,

¹ "What They're Saying About Obesity." *Weight Watchers Magazine* 9:14; May 1975.

² Gloria Zakus and Michael Solomon. "The Family Situations of Obese Adolescent Girls." *Adolescence* 8: 34; Spring 1973.

³ "What They're Saying About Obesity." p. 14.

⁴ David L. Snow and Mark L. Held. "Group Psychotherapy with Obese Adolescent Females." *Adolescence* 8:411; Fall 1973.

and Kate Smith, who did succeed in spite of their handicap. Teachers should request that publishers of instructional materials print pictures of the obese adolescent socializing with thin peers.

5. In-service meetings could be planned for the purpose of identifying obese children in the schools and for determining the needs that seem apparent.

6. An opportunity should be provided for obese students to meet voluntarily in groups to attempt to overcome the problems that surround obesity.

If schools follow these procedures, a reduction in fat adolescents and, consequently, fat adults should result. Not everyone can afford psychotherapy to determine what his problem is, but there is something in the group counseling

approach that gets results for the teenager. Knowing that others have the same problems and sharing the same fears and embarrassments help to make the hell of obesity more bearable. Contributing toward the elimination of this disease—this bondage—should be a goal of each school and each teacher. *EL*



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The School, The Community, and the Gifted Child

In 1972, the United States Office of Education (U.S.O.E.) published the following as its official definition of "giftedness":

Gifted and talented children are those, identified by professionally qualified persons, who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society. "High performance" might be manifested in any or a combination of these areas: (1) general intellectual ability; (2) specific academic aptitude; (3) creative or productive thinking; (4) leadership ability; (5) visual and performing arts; and (6) psychomotor ability.¹

This definition differs from earlier ones in several ways. First and probably most important, it recognizes not only the student with high intelligence (that is, "general intellectual ability"), but students with specific gifts such as creativity, leadership ability, exceptional talent in the performing arts, and high psychomotor ability.

Second, the definition places emphasis on the importance of providing services for the gifted that will enable them "to realize their contribution to self and society." The emphasis on "self" in the official U.S.O.E. definition seems of particular importance since gifted child programs in the past—especially those of the immediate post-

Sputnik era—placed heavy emphasis on the development of the gifted person's potential so that he/she could make a significant technological contribution to society. Little attention was given to the child's personal and social/emotional needs.

In brief, then, the present U.S.O.E. definition of gifted and talented appears to include any child who, because of exceptional ability, is unable to profit maximally from participation in the traditional school program alone.

It is estimated that 1.5 to 2.5 million school-age children in the United States meet the U.S.O.E. definition of giftedness. Only a small percentage of them are receiving "differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program . . ."

The initial steps in establishing any educational program are to determine the specific objectives of the program and to identify those persons who will assume administrative responsibility. In actual practice, these steps cannot really be separated because the type of program developed will depend largely on the abilities and

¹ S. P. Marland, Jr. *Education of the Gifted and Talented*. Report to the Subcommittee on Education, Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, U.S. Senate, Washington, D. C.: 1972. p. 10.

interests of the persons willing to initiate and guide it. At the same time, community support for the program leaders will be directly related to the community's perception of the value of the objectives of a program.

It is strongly suggested that a school/community program for the gifted begin with the group of gifted children who are in most obvious need of special help. In some communities this may be the intellectually gifted, in others, the creatively gifted, and in still others, the children gifted in performing arts. The type of children selected will depend on the perceived values of the community and the type of people available to provide leadership. At any rate, selecting a specific type of giftedness and focusing a program there will generally meet with more success than a "shotgun" approach where all types of gifted children are given some attention, but a quality program is not really developed for any. Once a single high-quality program has been implemented for one group of gifted children, other programs can be added one at a time. It is also advisable that an official organization devoted to the specific purpose of encouraging gifted programs be organized.

Even communities that cannot financially support a special school program for gifted students generally have a wealth of resources available. Libraries, museums, civic centers, industrial complexes, art studios, and public parks can all be utilized. Public librarians are generally willing to open their facilities to groups of interested, enthusiastic children. Some are willing to establish reading programs where children are given guidance in selecting books. Others are willing to hold evening or Saturday morning seminars where children can exchange ideas gleaned from their reading.

Museum personnel, likewise, are often willing to share their expertise with young people, not only for a single visit, but for the many times interested students of art and history may want to return for additional observation and study.

Local professionals (for example, physicians, lawyers, and university instructors) are usually willing to lead seminars for young people on topics of mutual interest. Parents, business leaders, and artists are also frequently interested in sponsoring seminars, work sessions, or "on-the-

job" experiences for interested children. In communities removed from centers of higher education or industry, correspondence between an aspiring young scholar and an established academician or practitioner can often be arranged.

Perhaps the most frequently overlooked resource people for gifted child education are our senior citizens—retired persons who may have a wealth of knowledge to share and the time to spend with young people. The student interested in local history may find a senior citizen an excellent source of information and encouragement.

Another often overlooked source of help for gifted children is older gifted children. Encouraging a senior-high-school-aged student to direct a learning experience for four or five younger children can prove beneficial to all. The older student learns to assume responsibility and to acquire feelings regarding the role of a teacher. The younger students profit from the knowledge imparted and, perhaps even to a greater extent, from being associated with a person whose academic attributes they can directly model.

Lyon² has referred to today's gifted children as "The Other Minority." By and large, school systems are not meeting their needs. While quality school programs are to be encouraged, the time has come for community leaders to stop placing total responsibility for gifted child programs upon educational administrators who are struggling with already strained budgets. The time has come for parents and civic leaders to assume an active role in developing community-backed programs that will complement the schools in meeting the needs of this unique group of young people. Such an undertaking will require sacrifice and a willingness to share oneself with others, but the benefits will be well worth the effort. ⁷¹

²Harold C. Lyon, Jr. "The Other Minority." *Learning* 2:65-66; January 1974.



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