

Editorial

Youth Cultures: What Can We Learn?

Donald H. Eichhorn

This issue concerns itself with the nature of "Youth Cultures," but more significantly, it deals with the question, "What Can We Learn?" The challenge to both practitioner and theoretician is evident and must be met if schools are to succeed.

A dilemma occurs when we consider the question, "What Can We Learn?" The dilemma focuses on adult reaction to the impact of existing youth cultures. Should American education reject the broad implications of the youth cultures and return to a narrow and basic function? Should American education attempt an accommodation with youth within the existing structure? Or should American education accept the change in the culture of youth as an accomplished fact and restructure the traditional organization into a dynamic, more responsive institution? The answer, if there is one, lies in our knowledge of youth cultures as compared with the total culture.

The 1960s were marked by a significant social upheaval. Its roots were deeply imbedded in an emerging opposition to the status quo. During these turbulent years, youth protest reached a crescendo of such magnitude that the nature of existing youth cultures took new form.

Cult of the Present

The so-called generation gap that traditionally marked a point of differentiation between youth and adults developed new dimensions. The thrust of youth altered with its insistence that the society-at-large recognize youth, not as a culture of transition between childhood and the seeming intransigence of the adult culture, but as an accomplished entity. In reality, this philosophical stance rejected the past and found little interest in the future. The "now" generation focused its attention clearly on the relevance of the moment.

Keniston places this into perspective by stating:

The cult of the present can take many forms, ranging from the quest for Nirvana to drug addiction, from aesthetic appreciation to violent delinquency. But we can distinguish two possible directions in any effort to intensify the present. One is a search for adventure, active, outgoing, and vigorous, which emphasizes the role of the actor in creating experience, in making new and heightened experiences for himself. An adventurous approach to experience leads to an equation of self and activity, in which emphasis is on the process rather than the product, in which the actor tries to find and reveal himself through his activity. In our own time, such an emphasis can be seen in forms as different as action painting and juvenile delinquency; in both cases meaning derives from action.¹

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, world events added to the transformed nature of youth. It is difficult to ascertain whether the new youth cultures exacerbated the problems of the adult society or if youth reaction was a defensive response to world events; nevertheless, the Vietnam War, the escalation into Cambodia, and Watergate are examples of events that helped crystallize the beliefs and mores of the post-1960 youth cultures.

Not only has the youth culture altered, but so have traditional institutions. For example, the family historically has been one of the units of stability in the rearing of the young; however today, different youth and adult attitudes toward marriage and the family are emerging. The idea that marriage is unacceptable to large numbers of youth is dispelled by the Virginia Slims American Women's Poll. In this poll,² 96 percent of the women and 92 percent of the men registered a

¹ Kenneth Keniston. *The Uncommitted: Alienated Youth in American Society*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1965.

² The Virginia Slims American Women's Opinion Poll, Vol. III. Conducted by the Roper Organization, Inc., 1974.

preference toward marriage as a way of life; however, the attitude of men and women toward the traditional roles in marriage are undergoing a change. The traditional role, with the man assuming the "bread winner" function while the woman runs the house and assumes responsibility for child development, is becoming less acceptable.

Obviously there is much support for this trend; conversely, Bronfenbrenner sees it as a

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factor of instability among youth. He pointedly remarks:

Sometimes children are alone for hours with nothing but television. The T.V. isn't going to care for them. What happens? The kids find other kids who are coming home to empty houses. They create a peer group culture, and it's likely to be an ugly culture—a culture of destroy, of break, of act out. The essence of it is anomie, a social and emotional disintegration, inside and outside. Frightening as it may be, this screaming for help isn't occurring among a small minority of children. Hardly a school in the country doesn't have a problem with vandalism and violence. Think what this suggests. A major institution, charged with preparing the next generation for adult life, is a focus of aimless destruction.³

Bronfenbrenner's reference to television is indeed appropriate. Television, stereos, and assorted electronic media not only provide a source of entertainment but are the companion and impetus for a vast array of youth mores. This pattern ranges from the cultural involvement with alcohol and drugs to a variety of art forms that

motivate, inspire, and compel peer association. The ramifications of this electronic generation are enormous, not the least being the extent of the economic market associated with clothes, music, cars, and recreation.

A New Era in Students' Rights

Students' rights have been the subject of numerous legal proceedings. The discovery that school authorities can no longer arbitrarily impose restrictive regulations on students without regard to their constitutionality has caused concern among adults and school officials. While legal protection of expanded student rights has sometimes been attributed to the breakdown of discipline in schools, there appears to be little evidence to justify this opinion. Nevertheless, action by the courts and legislatures guaranteeing students' rights has ushered in a new era in adult-youth relationships.

There are factors common to all youth and the force of these is applied irrespective of geography, race, religion, sex, or socioeconomic status. In addition, there are subcultures within the broader parameters of youth that are directly related to these diverse aspects.

In each of these subcultures, opportunity, or the lack of it, sets the climate for motivation resulting in varying degrees of independence and success. Coles states:

Children raised in the wealthier suburbs tend to experience a different sequence of hopefulness. . . . Suburban children are often brought up by trouble worried parents who frequently have no real faith in much of anything, parents who are banded about from one child-rearing expert to another, from one fad to another, from one secular creed to the next.

But at the same age that poor children begin to feel an erosion of hope, suburban kids find it. After

³ Urie Bronfenbrenner. "Nobody Home: The Erosion of the American Family." *Psychology Today*, May 1977. p. 41.

having gone through what may well be a tense, difficult childhood, they begin to gain all kinds of strength and confidence. . . . They see the promises made to them are going to be kept. About the same time, these upper middle-class kids begin to show independence, effectiveness, and authority.⁴

In contrast, Coles continues:

Poverty is no paradise; it can be hell. But many poor people can be, and are, very kind loving parents to their small children.

But when these children reach 9, 10, or 11 years old, they begin to find school useless at best. . . . They begin to see no future for themselves both jobless and scorned, pushed around by sheriffs and other authorities. . . .⁵

The interaction of youth and adults is further complicated by the phenomenon of earlier biological maturation. It has been well documented by Tanner⁶ and others that children are maturing biologically at an earlier age by some four months per decade since 1830. It appears that this trend has slowed, but there can be little doubt that youngsters in today's generation are physically larger and have developed earlier than previous generations. By maturing earlier, youth in our culture have an even longer period of social and economic dependence. These elements, coupled with the need to acquire knowledge and skills needed to ensure career attainment, add to the complexity of the youth cultures. Legal restraints that set age limits for compulsory school attendance, entry into the labor force, marriage, drinking, and voting rights contribute to the tensions surrounding youth. The relaxation of sexual taboos in adolescence and on college campuses can be attributed, in part, to the extended period of sexuality.

Conjecture Is Risky

The implications that youth cultures have for education and what educators may learn from

them are important. To conjecture about the direction of youth in the future would be very risky. What appears to be a rather significant change in the nature of youth cultures may only be a temporary development. If it is what it appears to be, a substantive shift, then the nostalgic and somewhat simplistic approaches being applied today will give way to more permanent changes in the educational lives of youth.

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The speculation raised by the actual status of youth cultures is germane to current national trends and issues. Witness the "Back-to-Basics" movement. Reminiscent of the post-Sputnik era when schools strongly emphasized the return to essentials, the present movement has the same basic rationale with additional elements, for example, the measurement of student competencies and the threat of nongraduation.

If educators and citizens establish standards without consideration of the youth culture they serve, what will be the result? It has been suggested that the present youth cultures are characterized to some degree by a lack of motivation. Will the threat of failure result in renewed motivation or will the impact of youth mores negate

⁴ Robert Coles. "The Cold Tough World of the Affluent Family." *Psychology Today*, November 1975. p. 67.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ J. M. Tanner. *Growth at Adolescence*. Oxford State: Blackwell Scientific Publications, 1962.

Educational Leadership Announces Themes for 1977-1978

Manuscripts and/or photographs relevant to the proposed themes for the 1977-1978 issues of *Educational Leadership* are requested. Topics and deadlines for receipt of manuscripts are as follows:

October: "Realities of Curriculum Change" (July 1, 1978)

November: "The 'Patchwork' Curriculum" (August 1, 1978)

December: "The Three R's—What Works?" (September 1, 1978)

January: "Teaching-Learning Styles" (October 1, 1978)

February: "The Quest for Equity and Quality" (November 1, 1978)

March: "Supervision—Leader Behavior" (December 1, 1978)

April: "Socialization: Who Educates?" (January 1, 1978)

May: Non-theme issue (February 1, 1978)

Length of manuscripts should be approximately 1800 words typed, double-spaced (about six pages). General style should conform to that of the journal. More detailed information on the technical requirements of manuscripts is available upon request from the editorial office.

Photographs and other illustrative materials, whether directly related to an article or not, are especially requested.

Manuscripts should be submitted in duplicate and materials to be returned *must* be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope adequate to return material. Decisions on materials will be made as promptly as possible.

Materials should be addressed to Robert R. Leeper, Editor, *Educational Leadership*, Suite 1100, 1701 K St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006. Phone: (202) 467-6480.

it? What happens to students who have been kept in school for the benefits of socialization, but who will now, in fair numbers, be sorted out? The premise of those who advocate established standards implies that students who work harder will succeed. Logic and experience indicate that some will, but there will be others who will not be able to meet the rigid standards. Are we prepared to provide an alternative institution involving new rites of passage or perhaps, as Jarrett suggests, an approach similar to the British system? He explains:

There they speak, not of graduates and drop-outs but of school leavers, with the understanding that one may leave school at any point over a period of several years without stigma, though with pretty clear indications of attainment in skills and knowledge.⁷

It is quite conceivable that this approach would be more appealing to youth than it will be for adults, particularly with our historic belief about education, rightly or wrongly, being the staircase to a better way of life.

Presumably, our educational programs will adjust in a manner that ensures the greatest possible academic success for the greatest number of youth. Perhaps the most significant lesson that can be learned from youth cultures is that this success must be accomplished without a denial of the critical social, emotional, and moral needs of today's youth. *EL*

⁷ James L. Jarrett. "I'm For Basics, But Let Me Define Them." *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 1977. p. 237.



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