



Photo: Michael D. Sullivan.

Understanding Youth: It's Tough Growing Up, But We Can Help

J. Merrell Hansen

This author considers two elements of this topic: (a) the difficulties, conflicts, and dilemmas of growing up in America today; and (b) the positive steps that educators might consider in facilitating this maturation process.

I only know it's funny never to be able to go outdoors . . . never to breathe fresh air . . . never to run and shout and jump. It's the silence in the nights that frightens me most. Every time I hear a creak in the house, or a step on the street outside, I'm sure they're coming for us.
—From *The Diary of Anne Frank*

A paradox in American culture is the attitude we hold concerning youth. On the one hand, we idolize, emulate, and envy them. Youth fashions, fads, and idiosyncrasies readily make their way into adult culture. The "groovy," "hip," and "now" adults let their hair lengthen, modify their speech, and wear distinctive apparel to indicate their acceptance of youth's mores and idioms. On the other hand, society exacts its toll upon youth. There is a constant pressure to make them less adolescent and more adult. Physiological maturation and the cultural changes have caused adolescence to decrease in terms of its length or importance. Eighteen-year-olds voting, pressure for career and vocational decisions, and access

to economic and social status associated with adulthood are indications that youth are being pressured by our society. The consequence is that the period of youth is both venerated and depreciated.

Changes Have Shaken Our World

Somewhere between "Happy Days" and the "Sweathogs," changes in youth culture have been dramatic. Pressure and demands have been applied to the growing up process. Young people have been required to adjust and to adapt to experiences often beyond their capabilities. In an interview with Daniel Goleman, Ashley Montagu claimed that we have a disrespect for children. Culture, he continued, is a conspiracy against being human.

. . . We kill these capacities by the way in which we teach children in the home or in the school. We require them to follow rigid rules and, in schools particularly, we cause children to learn in ways which are the very antithesis of actual learning. We force them to re-

member and regurgitate large quantities of rote-remembered facts for certain rituals that we call "examinations," and those who have the highest disgorge capacities are considered the most intelligent and the most brilliant and so are the most highly rewarded.¹

The consequences of these pressures have had a significant impact upon youth. The casualty list is costly. "Depression and suicide among American youth have become massive health and social problems that are reaching epidemic proportions."² Suicide is the third most common cause of death in young people, a frightening statistic. Only accidents and homicides claim more lives, which alone is a startling revelation. More than 4,000 young people in these growing years kill themselves annually. The suicide rate has tripled in less than a 20-year period of time. Younger people seem to be increasingly victims of this social dilemma.

"Educators and schools must reflect a concern, a positive assertion that children in our society should find growing up not an ordeal, but a time for growth, fulfillment, and achievement." Photo: Michael D. Sullivan.



The sexual revolution has reached the adolescent culture also. Approximately 11 million teenagers have sexual intercourse from time to time. Nearly 700,000 unwanted pregnancies among adolescents occur annually, with 300,000 abortions resulting, 200,000 births occurring outside of wedlock, and nearly 100,000 miscarriages.³ We must consider the scars of changing interpersonal relationships, without meaning, commitment, or responsibility.

Children see more television than classroom instruction. Models for emulation are being presented. The question is whether those perceived are the best for the young. The absence of leadership in either the homes or schools can be replaced by surrogate or artificial associations. The "split-level American family," as described by Urie Bronfenbrenner, continues to characterize family relationships. Families formerly were larger, not only in terms of numbers but associations and responsibilities. The absence of a father, reiterated Bronfenbrenner, whether through divorce, separation, or the "workaholic" syndrome, has contributed to a lowered motivation for achievement, the inability to defer immediate goals for future ones, a decline of self-esteem, an increased susceptibility to be influenced by other groups, and increased juvenile delinquency. The importance of parents in the development of values, attitudes, and personalities has been evidenced.⁴ But culturally, we continue to minimize this social and genetic relationship.

Demographic changes have multiplied the influences upon our youth. For example, the population has increased 85 times in a 200-year period of time. During that same time, the gross national product increased from \$3 billion to \$1.4 trillion. The family decreased from 6 per household to a current 3. The population is getting older. In a

¹ Daniel Goleman. "Don't Be Adultish: An Interview with Ashley Montagu." *Psychology Today*, August 1977. p. 46.

² James D. McNeely, Mohammad Shafiq, and John J. Schwab. "The Student Suicide Epidemic." *Today's Education* 66: 71; September-October 1977.

³ Donn Byrne. "A Pregnant Pause in the Sexual Revolution." *Psychology Today*, July 1977. pp. 67-68.

⁴ Urie Bronfenbrenner. "The Split-Level American Family." *Saturday Review* 50: 60-66. October 7, 1967.

200-year period of time, the median age was 15. Today it is 29. The majority then were farm workers. Today, less than four percent would be classified as farmers. And the annual income per person then was less than \$500 and now it is about \$5,200.⁵ With such changes, youth has been caught in the middle. Economic and social relationships have been altered. New questions never asked before are now fundamental for all youth.

Child abuse, a national disgrace, reflects the uncertain role of children in society. According to recent reports, approximately one million children are abused or neglected annually. Of that number, about 100,000 to 200,000 are physically attacked; sexual abuse includes about 60,000 to 100,000 victims. The remainder are neglected children. Amazingly and regrettably, 2,000 children die each year of circumstances suggesting maltreatment.⁶ This occurs in a society that has revered youth as a source of renewal and strength.

Educators and schools must reflect a concern, a positive assertion that children in our society should find growing up not an ordeal, but a time for growth, fulfillment, and achievement. Yet, the schools have not been viewed in such a wholesome perspective.

This is the philosophy I am trying to change—the philosophy, inherent in much of our education, that if you fail a child that will cause him to buckle down and work hard; it will make a new man of him. It just doesn't work that way. Most of us in this room know that all you learn from failing is how to fail. And in our schools we are teaching many, many children how to fail.⁷

Educators must address the basic question of how we can assist in this unique time of growth when youth are most challenged. The battle in the past has revealed unyielding notions about what the schools ought to do for youth. For example, it was assumed that educators knew what needed to be learned; that which was coerced would ultimately be justified as serving the best interests of the students; and conventional and traditional curricula would eventually be vindicated as superior to more modern or innovative programs.

Commager noted that America had reached a watershed of ideas at the turn of the century. Shifting emphases from an agrarian society to an industrial one, from rural to urban, from simple



"The schools must be places where identity, responsibility, and integrity are promoted." Photo: Michael D. Sullivan.

to complex forced a rejection of traditional practices that no longer could survive.⁸ Education has reached this same watershed point. Many practices and beliefs that have endured no longer are appropriate. For example, students' rights have revolutionized the role of administrators and teachers. Unheard 20 years ago, these concerns are commonplace in every school and district.

The courts have concurred that students, despite their age or maturity, are protected and

⁵ "The Makers of America." *U.S. News and World Report*, July 8, 1974. pp. 226-29.

⁶ Myron Brenton. "What Can Be Done About Child Abuse?" *Today's Education* 66: 51-53; September-October 1977.

⁷ William Glasser. "The Effect of School Failure on the Life of a Child." *National Elementary Principal* 49: 11; September 1969.

⁸ Henry Steele Commager. *The American Mind*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1950.

ensured certain rights. Amish children because of religious conviction have been exempted from some of the requirements of compulsory education laws. *Tinker* was a benchmark case that guaranteed that students had certain rights of expression and speech and that these rights were not left at the school door. A national news commentator lamented that the courts were granting children the right to due process before removal or expulsion from school. He felt that this would reduce the authority and power of the schools. However, legalistically one cannot disagree with the belief that a student ought to have some rights when decisions concerning his/her future are determined. Rights of privacy, individuality, and expression have greatly altered many practices of the schools.

Can Schools Influence Attitudes and Values?

Recent reports have questioned the success of the educational enterprise in influencing future attitudes and values of children. It was judged that education did little to prepare children for vocational, personal, and social adjustments that had to be made. In evaluating the "quality of life" and the influence of education upon that criteria, it was stated simply that "the quality of life for 30-year-olds is 'quite good,' but not thanks to their education."⁹ Robert Gagné in the same report stated that "the evidence of these interviews suggests that a high school education as a whole serves no very useful purpose."¹⁰ These young people desire physical and mental health. They wish to have a close relationship with their mate. They want to contribute to work and to home situations. These were listed as prime concerns. Being a parent, developing maturity, and developing and using one's mind were listed as desired goals and objectives. Then they concluded that schools have not contributed in achieving these capabilities that would improve the quality of life for these individuals.¹¹ This need not be. The schools should not abdicate their responsibilities or their opportunities. What then might be done?

Educators must revise some of their traditionally held premises concerning how they might contribute, remediate, and influence the growth and development of young people. These premises might include the following:

- There is a need to establish objectives that will assist youth to find their identity, to establish their goals and values, and to implement the processes to achieve these objectives.

- Learning must reflect the needs, capabilities, interests, and development of the students, those who are to be served immediately by the school enterprise.

- The school must be seen as a social and as a personal institution rather than just as an intellectual or cognitive one.

- Roles where adulthood, citizenship, responsibility, and decision-making may occur must be incorporated, demonstrated, and emulated in the schools.

Identity, the ability to assert and to establish oneself as a unique entity, is a continuing challenge for young people. The interpersonal dynamics of this experience are particularly amazing. Youth attempts to establish some identity through associations that one makes. Slang and stereotypes are typical of the vernacular used to classify young people. These range from "hood" and "tough" to "straight" and "square." Each new generation identifies a new set of nomenclature to describe the various identity groups. Sometimes these are complimentary and enhancing, building one's status; others are defaming and degrading, judgmental "put-downs." They are expressions of identity. To survive in the world of the young, one must commit him/herself to those associations and patterns that bring identity to them. Yet, the schools have systematically attempted to interfere with this tendency. Rules, regulations, and pressure to conform tend to reduce expressions of independence and uniqueness. One would not advocate deviancy and anarchy that are counterproductive, but one must permit and encourage individuality and independence. Glasser succinctly stated it when he noted:

. . . All of us, no matter who we are, have this basic need to identify ourselves as somebody, as a

⁹ "30-Year-Olds Look Back and See High School 'Irrelevant.'" *ASCD News Exchange* 18: 1; May 1976.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 12.

separate, unique, distinct human being—our self-image, our self-concept, whatever you want to call it. There is nothing complicated about this. It's me in distinction to you, and you in distinction to me. From the time we are born until the time we die, we struggle to gain and to maintain for ourselves this feeling as an identified person. We are somebody.¹²

The second premise is that schools must be places and educators must allow students to experience those desirable activities and opportunities appropriate for their interests, needs, capabilities, and development. We will not require them to run faster than they can. We will not violate their integrity by imposing in contradiction to their nature and development. Concomitant to this is the belief that our community, society, nation, and perhaps the world will be better because of the educational experiences of our young. But if in the process the young become victims rather than benefactors, then the endeavor of the ends justifying the means is an obvious prevarication of moral right. We foster our own seeds of discontent when we fail to understand that youth should be viewed as allies rather than antagonists.

Thirdly, the schools must not be persuaded by legislative or popular edicts that a return to the "basics," competency requirements, and cognitive skills constitutes the only purpose of the schools. This educational myopia will convince children that personal values, interpersonal relationships, affective and emotional development are either impertinent or irrelevant. Repeatedly, the advocating solely of the "development of rational powers" or cognitive abilities with a concentration exclusively upon knowledge acquisition will deprive students of other dimensions required for adequate living. In his compelling and classical commentary concerning man's "escape from freedom," Erich Fromm stated:

One important element is the fact that man cannot live without some sort of cooperation with others. In any conceivable kind of culture man needs to cooperate with others if he wants to survive, whether for the purpose of defending himself against enemies or dangers of nature, or in order that he may be able to work and produce.¹³

Students "educated" only in cognitive abilities are prepared only to be acted upon rather than to create or to initiate. The telling lesson of Watergate was that it occurred when expediency



and loyalty replaced individual integrity and responsibility. When one has a set of values, is capable of making rational judgments, and is permitted to participate according to those values and judgments, the possibility of realizing individual potential is maximized. When one is devoid of personal and social adequacies that give meaning to life, then indeed, he/she is one of those wasted people described by T. S. Eliot: "I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker, And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, And in short, I was afraid."

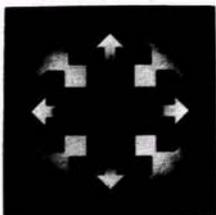
And finally, the school must provide an opportunity where adulthood, where roles of adequacy and identity are initiated. We cannot expect children to accept responsibility when they have never had the opportunity to accept and to know responsibility. We cannot consider one a good citizen when his/her behavior is so contrived and artificial that no civic judgment is permitted. A child denied the right to contribute to the decisions about his/her welfare will not learn independence that can be expressed confidently and competently when he/she becomes an adult. It is amazing that high school seniors acquire so much

¹² Glasser, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

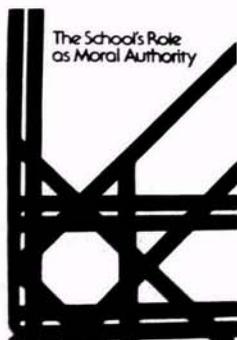
¹³ Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*. New York: Discus Books, 1969. pp. 35-36.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT
STAFF LIBERATION

Edited by
Charles W. Beegle and Roy A. Edelfelt



Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development



The School's Role
as Moral Authority

Staff Development: Staff Liberation

Charles W. Beegle and Roy A. Edelfelt, editors
\$6.50 (611-77106)

This publication presents a variety of ways of conceptualizing and organizing the staff improvement function, emphasizing the "liberation" and self-growth of individuals.

The School's Role as Moral Authority

R. Freeman Butts, Donald Peckenpaugh,
and Howard Kirschenbaum
\$4.50 (611-77110)

Companion essays on moral education analyze a number of contradictory arguments regarding values education, contrast alternative teaching strategies, and review a number of ongoing programs.

Name _____

Street _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

No. of Copies

____ **Staff Development: Staff Liberation**
(611-77106, \$6.50, 124 pp., 1977)

____ **The School's Role as Moral Authority**
(611-77110, \$4.50, 80 pp., 1977)

Enclosed is my check payable to ASCD
Please bill me .

Postage and handling extra on all billed orders. All orders totaling \$10.00 or less must be prepaid by cash, check, or money order. Orders from institutions and businesses must be on an official purchase order form. Discounts on orders of the same title to a single address: 10-49 copies, 10%; 50 or more copies, 15%.

Return to:

Association for Supervision and Curriculum
Development—Box 342
1701 K St., N.W., Suite 1100
Washington, D.C. 20006

maturity when they become college freshmen. It is largely an institutional and cultural expectation that has changed rather than a biological one.

Bloom has noted that self-regard and strong ego development occur in early childhood, periods of latency (6-11), and adolescence. Self-concept is defined fairly early in an individual. The continual need for adequacy persists in that individual. "A high proportion of students can experience some degree of success in some school-related activities and thus escape a complete sense of failure in connection with the school."¹⁴

The pressures upon youth are awesome. The consequences of these pressures have prompted rises in suicide, changes in sexual and adjustment patterns, and alterations in family and interpersonal relationships. Society has changed. The political and economic milieu has been irrevocably transformed. Unsurprisingly, these conditions have produced a new and perplexing world for our young people. Educational experiences have reached a point where these also must be changed. Emphasis upon individual, personal, and social objectives is necessary to prevent an education for a one-dimension existence when the future will demand multiple abilities.

The schools must be places where identity, responsibility, and integrity are promoted. Experiences must include opportunities for adulthood and citizenship. Growing up is difficult. Many of us, if it is not too painful, remember it well. As educators, we can, if we will, help young people not only to survive but to enjoy and appreciate these golden, precious days. Perhaps this will include the richest rewards of teaching. [E]

¹⁴ Benjamin S. Bloom. "Affective Outcomes of School Learning." *Phi Delta Kappan* 59: 198; November 1977.



J. Merrell Hansen is Associate Professor of Education at Washington State University, Pullman.

Copyright © 1978 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.