

Preadolescents in the Junior High

Above all other qualities, the psychological needs of the students require that the junior high school have a flexible curriculum and utilize educational procedures which nurture individual differences.

THE CHANGE from childishness to adolescence takes place for most youngsters some time between the dates they enter the seventh grade and leave the ninth grade. The period of transition, often marked physically by rapid growth, is one which has received until recently little careful scientific study. In the terminology now current, this is the period of preadolescence.

To place preadolescence in its sequential setting, and at the risk of some oversimplification, it is necessary to give a brief summary of the psychological characteristics most likely to be associated with childhood, adolescence, and preadolescence:

A child can be considered, for this purpose, as a young person who is in almost all respects dependent upon adults, whose chief sources of need gratification are grownups, and who tends to assume without struggle the status and roles accorded children in his culture.

An adolescent is a young person whose reproductive system has matured, who is economically dependent upon adults, whose chief source of need gratification is his peers, who has open interest in the

opposite sex, and for whom status and roles as defined for children and adults in his culture are confused. He tends to be moving toward adulthood.

The term, "preadolescent" has taken a special meaning within recent years. It refers to a fairly well-defined transition stage between childhood and adolescence, as described above. Some writers would call it "early adolescence." Others, singling out salient characteristics found in limited groups, have referred to "the negative stage" and "the gang age." A more accurate but cumbersome designation would be "the circum-pubescent years." Preadolescents are young people who, physically, are in a period of growth spurt which transforms their builds from that of children to that of young adults and which includes maturation of the reproductive system. Their attitude towards adults is often one of open ambivalence. These young people are shifting emotional dependence from parents to peer groups. Their budding interest in the opposite sex may show itself more by hostility than by open attraction. Play groups are almost entirely self-segregated by sex. The personality structure often goes through a temporary disorganiza-

tion. There is likely to be movement, without positive goal, away from childishness as characterized by docile submission to adult domination.

A Flexible Setting

Although the majority of students will go through preadolescence at some time during their junior high school careers, the most striking thing about the junior high school student group as a whole is that it consists of a mixture of psychological stages. For no youngster is the change from child to preadolescent to adolescent so sharp that he moves from one to another in the course of a single month. Rather, each change is gradual and for many months a given student may combine qualities belonging in different areas to two, and sometimes all three, of these phases. Each boy and girl follows his own timetable. Hence, chronological age is a poor index of psychological qualities. The girls, as a group, tend to move through preadolescence into adolescence about eighteen months to two years before the boys. Within each sex group there is likely to be a four-year cycle extending from the time the first significant fraction enter preadolescence until the last enter adolescence.

The resultant situation is that, if we use physical status as a rough index and engage in willful oversimplification, we can think of a typical sixth grade class of forty as composed of two fully adolescent girls, eight preadolescent girls, ten childish girls, four preadolescent boys and sixteen childish boys. A ninth grade class of the same size would be composed of sixteen fully adolescent girls, four preadolescent girls, two childish boys, eight

preadolescent boys, and ten fully adolescent boys.

Although junior high school classes will usually show this type of mixture, always in each class there will be a significant fraction of preadolescents. Because of the personality qualities associated with that phase of development, this fraction will usually call for more attention by the teacher and be the source of more strain on group organization.

The genius of the junior high school is that it can provide a setting where a psychologically mixed group can develop in a framework not dominated by any one subgroup. An eight-year elementary school is likely to be geared to the needs of little children. Those seventh and eighth graders who reach adolescence are apt to present difficult problems; rules and regulations needed to protect little folk are to them childish restrictions. Yet, to make exceptions for the large, prestige-bearing, early maturers may produce unfortunate group repercussions. Socially, the first girls and boys to mature may feel unduly conspicuous and isolated; there is no large group to accept them and into which they can blend.

A four-year high school creates the opposite problem. The late-maturing boys may appear in its halls as bewildered children moving aimlessly among giants. Social life and physical activities are geared to adolescents; class procedures are fitted to the type of teacher-student relationship suited to their maturity. The immature minority may be allowed to stay lost.

It is clear that the span of chronological ages encompassed by the junior high school is one which presents unique situations that can most easily be handled in a separate administrative unit. Unfortunately, in too many instances the possibilities of special helpfulness to young

WILLIAM W. WATTENBERG is professor of educational psychology, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.

people remain relatively unexplored. Although there are many promising exceptions, junior high schools too often tend to suppress the differences among young people which might better be cherished.

For example, there is good evidence that changes in interests and needs accompany the changes in physique and physiology at sexual maturity. Thus, in a class containing a mixture of children, preadolescents, and adolescents, one would expect to find striking individual differences not only in mental ability and personality but also in the appeal of any topic. To meet this situation, there is need for classroom procedures which will permit of subgrouping in accordance with differences in felt need. If there is any one place in the educational system which requires use of committee work it is at the junior high school level.

An illustration of a typical dispersion of interest was observed in a seventh grade class visited recently by the author. The general topic on which the group was at work was Indian life. One committee, composed largely of mature girls, was delving intensively into family life in various tribes. At the opposite extreme, another group, composed entirely of young-looking boys was discussing and acting out how Indians made war.

There is need for a study to discover general topics which will permit subgroups to follow such a range of interest and yet contribute to the progress of larger group projects. Much too often when one enters a junior high school class he finds a procedure and choice of topics almost identical, except for level, with what would be found in a senior high school or college. Psychologically, this represents as bad a loss of educational opportunity as though kindergartens were to imitate second grade class procedure.

Another important set of problems with which the junior high school can deal, and does so very effectively in many cases, arises from the fact that sex identification and development of self-concepts relative to sex roles are taking place for many young people. To a large extent, departmentalization by ensuring that every child will have substantial contact with adults of his own sex helps to meet the resultant need. Certainly, a boy should have masculine guidance in the important areas of learning game skills and industrial art skills; a girl in exploring home making skills. The present author would question the wisdom of the recent trend to ignore or suppress real sex differences by converting the traditionally sex-segregated shop and home economics classes into mixed home mechanics and family living classes at the junior high school level. Of course, both sexes at some point in their schooling should gain the benefits of recognizing the responsibilities for joint planning and shared skill in the home. Such classes from a psychological viewpoint might better be placed in the early elementary or the later high school grades.

A related complex of problems, more often ignored, is symptomized by the changes in relationship of boys to girls which frequently occur. Quite often in the seventh grade, girls emerge as class leaders. If elections are held, girls tend to vote for other girls; boys, inclined to regard class officers as being straw bosses allied to the traditional enemy tribe of Adults, may be willing to see girls assume that role. By the end of the ninth grade, the boys are yielding to standards of decorum and grooming more typical of young adults. Now, when elections are held, they tend to vote for other boys. Meanwhile, the girls' admiration of girls in general has been dropping and many

girls feel that boys make better leaders.

Behind what appears to be an unimportant and amusing minor shift in voting habits, a crucial drama has been unfolding. At issue basically is the girls' evaluation of their femininity. In later years, for many women the striving for masculinity as a desirable condition is a key element in mental health problems. The change in attitude of which such difficulties are born takes shape during the junior high school years, although its basis is in earlier experiences. Little is done in junior high schools in relation to this fundamental attitudinal change; usually it is allowed to go ignored.

Counseling Services

This and other personal developmental problems point to the need for provision of counseling services. In many communities, the legal limit for compulsory attendance comes within a year or two following junior high school. In fact, many young folks arrive at their decision to "serve out their time" and then quit school when they are in the eighth or ninth grade. Here, again, although the basic attitudes become visible at the junior high school level, the experiences from which they arose are often of earlier origin. The availability of personal counseling might be of significance to many individuals. This would require rather special arrangements and changes in policy.

In the problems of elementary school children, the present activities of parents are so significant that the procedure of choice in dealing with personality problems is to contact the parents. Accordingly, there is a justifiable tendency to use available funds to increase the number of visiting teachers or school social workers. By the junior high school years children are mature enough and their

relations with parents are such that direct counseling with the young person may be a more efficient remedial procedure than contact with the parents, although parents should never be ignored. At any rate, for most boys and some girls social distance between child and parent is rapidly widening by the time of puberty.

Unfortunately in too many junior high schools, the flare-ups of disciplinary difficulties result in a drift toward using counselors as high-powered punitive agents. This prevents all but the most exceptional from being able to establish with most youngsters who have personal problems the relationships needed for genuine counseling. Also, the type of problem already mentioned requires a program of several counseling sessions; if, as is generally the case, junior high school counselors have heavy case loads and other duties, they may be forced toward ineffective one-shot attempts to deal with basic attitudes and reserve multiple-contacts for only those boys or girls sent repeatedly to the office for dressings-down. To date, attempts to reduce early school-leaving by counseling have proved usually to be ineffective. One probable reason is that it has come too late and been too diluted.

Interestingly, the junior high school years have been found good ones for attempts to introduce programs for direct study of human relations and other psychological problems. Students are vividly aware of social relationships; many are experiencing conflicts of values between home and peer group. When opportunity is provided they are ready and eager to discuss issues related to popularity, family relations, emotional reactions, and values. Experimental programs for stimulating concentrated discussion of these topics have been success-

ful, and seem to produce durable results. The curricular context for such discussions may vary much from school to school. In some cases, the intensive study of human relations and personal adjustment is given a course name and is assigned separate time; more often it develops within the setting of a core program, an English class, a social studies sequence, a family living, a science, or a group guidance program.

The purpose of the present article has been to point out some characteristics of student groups at the junior high school level and, in doing so to indicate possible gains to be won by having an administrative educational unit devoted to meeting the needs of these young people. While an administrative arrangement would undoubtedly make it easier to serve the group well, it is by no means a guarantee that this will happen. There are altogether too many schools where the staffs try to suppress the striking individual differences which are so typical of the young people. Above all other qualities,

the psychological needs of the students require that the junior high school have a flexible curriculum and utilize educational procedures which nurture individual differences. How many junior high schools have those qualities?

In many communities, an eight-year elementary school or a four-year high school has developed a program for meeting individual differences which provides a more hospitable atmosphere for preadolescents and for mixed groups than have some junior high schools. The administrative inconveniences involved have been quickly swept aside.

Regardless of the structure of institutions, whether it be an 8-4 plan, a 6-3-3 plan, or a 6-4-4 plan, the significant educational objective should be to create a setting where groups mixed as to developmental phase may work together on problems which are vital to the individual young people. The argument should begin at that point rather than assume that the structure will determine the program.

Announcing . . .

One Hundred Years of Curriculum Improvement 1857-1957

This useful, informative, 8-page leaflet was distributed at the ASCD Annual Luncheon on March 21 in St. Louis. As there were many requests at the luncheon for additional copies, the Association is now making these available at the following prices:

10 copies—\$1.00; 25 copies—\$2.00; 50 copies—\$3.00; 100 copies—\$6.00

This leaflet is well suited for use in:

- Teacher education classes
- In-service education programs
- Parent groups interested in modern trends in curriculum improvement

ORDERS WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED FOR LESS THAN TEN COPIES.

Order from:

ASCD, 1201 Sixteenth St., N.W., Washington 6, D. C.

Copyright © 1957 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.