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A Janus Knot

Adolescent Development and Education

The outstanding blot on the record of public educational systems in recent years has been the "high" or secondary school. Once effective enough for a narrower purpose with a selected clientele, its enforced accommodation of the entire youth population; being kept off the labour market for a few more years, has been accompanied by no real change in what society expects of it or what government designs. Mosher reviews the characteristics of people in this phase of life, a time when almost every aspect of the mature adult is at a critical — and hence highly educable — stage of development, and sketches out by contrast the extraordinary gaps between the need and the supply. The traditional academic route has not an inessential part to play; but if the school does not play any of the other parts to any effect, as can now be done with our new understanding and new processes, it will be a lamentable failure for democracy.

Harvard University awarded Jean Piaget an honorary doctorate in 1936. But it is only in the last five to ten years in this country that the major implications of our accumulating knowledge — about how and under what conditions human beings develop cognitively — have begun to register on school people. One of the most critical periods for intellectual growth is early adolescence. I am referring, of course, to the shift from what Piaget calls concrete operations — thinking that is anchored in and limited by reality as the child experiences it — to "formal operations" or abstract thinking — thinking that builds on thinking.

An intellectual capacity to deal with abstract hypotheses, relationships, theories, symbols, ideals, problems, and reasoning — things that never were and never will be concrete — is critically essential to success in much of the secondary school program. And yet, until recently, we have not been aware of or sensitive to this development in adolescence. We have created and taught curricula that flew in the face of the fact that many kids are simply unready or unable to deal with an implicit intellectual demand. Several of the innovative and imaginative curricula of the 1960s may have foundered here. Nor have we attempt-

ted to establish whether our ways of educating adolescents in fact contribute anything to this critical increment in human intelligence. Indeed, I suspect a careful study using Piagetian developmental measures of the traditional subject areas in the high school, in terms of success in teaching students to think, would produce explosive findings. My hunch is that we teach teenagers new content but not new ways of thinking; we teach them answers, which are conventional, sophisticated, or useful, rather than how to think about and act on problems.

The essential point is that developmental psychology calls into question the cognitive fit of much of our present curricular material and pedagogy as these relate to adolescents, while at the same time establishing that this is a prime time for education. The issues in this paradox are these: When does the individual adolescent make this transition to rational and abstract thought? What kinds of intellectual and educational experiences contribute to this development? What are the implications for present or alternative education programs if the bottle for any given class of adolescents can be cognitively half full and half empty? Dulit estimates that only one-third to one-half of American adolescents and adults achieve fully this capacity for formal thought.¹

Idealism

A further illustration of the proposition that current developmental knowledge of children and adolescents and how they grow has profound implications for their education is to be found in Kohlberg's research on moral development. Most people who write about adolescents, for example, refer to the idealism of this age group. Adolescents have to make difficult personal decisions as to what is right and what is wrong. Their moral concern and sensibility may easily be subverted into rigid political ideology, into new and exotic moralities or religions, or into despair. Underlying all of this is a concern to make moral and ethical sense of their world. Ritual disagreements with authorities (for example, parents and teachers) and an idolatry of unconventional flora (for example, grass) and fauna (what adult can dig Elton John's costumes?) mask a profound adolescent movement toward the social and moral conventions of family, church and state. Indeed, if adolescence goes according to the developmental script, it is a rehearsal and perfecting of the lines, roles, norms, and rules of being adult. In a social sense, adolescence means the giving up of an exclusive selfishness, a hedonism, and an instrumental use of others. The perspective that replaces this "Me Firstism" is a gradually enlarging recognition of the rights and feelings of other people — typically friends and family — that can also encompass a genuine concern for others in the family of man. How else can one explain the idealism of twenty-five-mile walkathons for victims of muscular dystrophy or fasts for African famine relief?

Because of Kohlberg's major theoretical contributions, we have a relatively clear blueprint for this aspect of human development: the characteristics of moral reasoning in childhood and adolescence, its progression, and some at least of the experiences critical to its stimulation. Developmental psychology, in

Kohlberg's work, has established with considerable validity and exactness "what (moral) tendencies are especially seeking expression at a particular time." The evidence of developmental psychology also is that the child, and especially the adolescent, is less likely to develop any more sophisticated ethical position as an adult if his natural efforts to create a personal moral philosophy remain unsupported by systematic moral education. Thus, adolescence is established by developmental psychology as a prime time for ethical or values education of a nonindoctrinative character — something eschewed by American public schools for forty years.

Work

The world of work also affects adolescents in a degree depending upon social class. Work may be nothing more than a part-time job at McDonalds, as a way to achieve some financial independence of one's family. The minimum wage is, of course, an index of becoming one's own person. Work can also be an imminent issue for students going into the armed services or into apprentice training at the end of high school. For many adolescents, those who are college bound, the issue is more what college, than what job. For them, career decisions are deferred until the end of college or perhaps longer. But work, as one more attribute of what it is to be adult, impinges on the adolescent.

Identity

It is almost a cliché in the discussion of adolescence to talk about this period in terms of the formation of identity. Erik Erikson's belief that the central problem the teenager faces is to define himself — to decide who he is and will become — has probably been the most influential theory of American adolescence in the past twenty-five years. Erikson is the man who gave American adolescents an identity crisis. The position is, essentially, that adolescents are struggling to form more comprehensive answers to the question: "Who am I?" Their new intellectual capabilities are applied to — indeed, permit — that question. Ethically, they are trying to answer it; in the development of new competencies, and in the context of their relationship with peers, this is also the case. Because this question is a central one developmentally, it must also be a basic focus of education.

The most contemporary and comprehensive theory of ego development is that advanced by Jane Loevinger. Her descriptions of ego stages tell us much about a person's character development, his social "style," what he thinks about most, and how his mind works. For example, many adolescents are at the conformist stage of ego development. They conform to external rules and express shame or guilt for breaking rules. In the social sphere they are concerned to belong, and evidence a superficial niceness to friends. They are consciously preoccupied with their appearance, with social acceptance by their peers, and with what adults consider "banal" feelings and behaviour (such as endless telephone discussions concerning friends of both sexes, and buying and listening

to rock music). The conformist tends, conceptually, to simplifications. He uses many stereotypes about adolescents different from himself ("He hangs around with rich snobs from Chestnut Hill," "They're jocks; they only drink milk") and clichés ("That's cool," "Shine her on"). The essential point here is that Loevinger's data are especially rich in describing, empirically, a wide and central strand of the teenager's development, that of his ego and character.

Competence

What is often not said about adolescents is that they can be remarkably competent. Some adolescents can learn to teach or counsel other people as effectively as do graduate students or practising professionals. They can carry out sophisticated programs of social research and action. They learned to fly military aircraft and helicopters in Vietnam. They can produce musicals, conduct complicated scientific experiments, and write subtle poetry. If adolescents are to develop into competent adults, extensive opportunities to do these things are essential. There is much psychological and educational evidence to support this. Adolescents need opportunities to take active social roles, to have significant and systematic responsibility for analysis and action on real problems, and to be held accountable.

In summary, physical development is completed in adolescence. Although it is typical for the adolescent to be uncomfortable or self-conscious about his or her body, it is an adult body. And its most interesting parts achieve sexual maturity. Adult intellectual capacity is being reached. Though much knowledge and most wisdom lie ahead, the kind of thinking that will characterize adult life is already operating. Idealism is strong. Direct family influence wanes and is supplanted by that of contemporaries. Economic independence from the family increasingly is possible, as are many adult competencies. The rites of passage to adulthood (a driver's license, leaving school, legal drinking, voting) are available or within view. And it behooves all adults in sensitive roles to that coming of age — teachers, counsellors, and parents — to know all they can about, and to care redemptively for, the generation most closely following them.

Development as the aim

The purpose of education is the stimulation of individual development. The education of adolescents must stimulate cognitive or intellectual growth, moral sensibilities and reasoning, social skills, affect, vocational competencies, aesthetic development, and physical maturation. The basic idea is that education should discern and provide those systematic experiences or stimuli that give the individual the greatest opportunity to develop or grow in interaction with his environment.

This is a conception of education as old or as "progressive" as John Dewey. Kohlberg and Mayer have recently restated it:

The . . . stream of educational ideology which is still best termed "progressive" following Dewey . . . holds that education should nourish the child's natural interaction with a developing society or environment . . . development (is) a progression through invariant ordered sequential stages. The educational goal is the eventual attainment of a higher level or stage of development in adulthood, not merely the healthy functioning of the child at a present level . . . this aim requires an educational environment that actively stimulates development through the presentation of resolvable but genuine problems or conflicts. For progressives, the organizing and developing force in the child's experience is the child's active thinking, and thinking is stimulated by the problematic, by cognitive conflict. Educative experience makes the child think — think in ways which organize both cognition and emotion . . . the acquisition of "knowledge" is an active change in patterns of thinking brought about by experiential problem-solving situations.²

What educators now have available to them is an extraordinary amount of psychological knowledge about human development that was not "known" to Dewey. This steadily increasing body of knowledge about the stage, sequence, and causes of individual development, tied to Dewey's philosophical case for development as the aim of education, can lead to a renewed emphasis on, and greater effectiveness for, developmental education in this country.

But why argue for a neoprogressivism? A personal reminiscence may provide part of the answer. My first teaching experience was twenty-five years ago in a small town in Nova Scotia. I was asked to tutor an attractive eighth-grade girl in Canadian history. I coached her energetically, seriously, and unquestioningly on the residual powers clause of the British North American Act and similar mysteries. That was my thing, I knew it; and Canadian history had, I am sure, the support of the community. Gayle dutifully tried to learn, but she was distracted. Part of her distraction was explained by what I learned several months later — she was pregnant. My academic singularity in the face of her crisis and need as a person has been the source of much reflection in the intervening years.

Carl Rogers on one end of a log

In a larger sense, I was confronting an old educational conundrum: that whole adolescents sat in my high school classrooms. All my students, as people, had gifts and promise; all, as humans, were flawed. Perhaps their youth and mine prevented both of us from a full recognition of what that meant. But certainly my commitment to teach them the things I had learned in college — history, economics, geography — which their parents paid me to teach and on which an educational establishment (or "Regents") examined them stringently, together with our social roles as "teacher" and "student," blinded me to the broader compass of the things they were concerned to learn and become.

Another part of my case for developmental education stems from the disillusionment of a counselling psychologist. I, like many others, succumbed to

the romantic, client-centered belief that the way truly to help is to listen to them, support them, and clarify for them the confusion and pain that mark most young people's coming of age. Certainly the focus on the personal, social, and career dilemmas faced by young people seemed valid, and it was possible to be of help by listening and supporting empathically. The vicarious participation in other people's private lives was undoubtedly part of the fascination, as was the becoming expert at a craft — counselling. But the myth that counselling or therapy was some kind of model or ideal for education (Carl Rogers on one end of a log) simply could not be sustained. The connotation that such problems and adolescents in general are better understood in terms of "mental health" rather than of development, the reluctance of counsellors to challenge their clients intellectually or ethically, the scent of pathology about the whole therapy-counselling enterprise, always troubled me. The evidence as to the lack of training³ and effect⁴ of school counsellors, added to the patent injustice of providing special services to only one out of every five high school students who have a right to them, became irrefutable.

Lawrence Cremin has observed that the guidance counsellor is the most characteristic child of the progressive movement in American education.⁵ But what happens to disillusioned counsellors? For me, the answer is to go back to the underlying ideals and assumptions of progressivism: helping the individual develop to the fullest his mind, body, character, person, career, arts, and societies is the most valid objective of education in a democracy. Such neoprogressivism can now be built, as noted before, on a much deeper psychological knowledge of what contributes to human growth in these areas. It will require educational programs — the provision of systematic opportunities for adolescents to study and act on a wide range of personal and social problems — that go substantially beyond, but need not reject, either constitutional law or empathy as means to human development.

Education has always arrogated to itself the stimulation of intellect, of teaching people to think. As noted earlier, its degree of success is another matter. While the personal development of students has been honoured more in pious commencement rhetoric than by actual schooling, it has been at least a secondary concern behind some curricula in English and social studies, or else its espousal has reflected private guilt in committed teachers and counsellors. It is one reason for many alternative schools.

School from the neck up

Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* is asked by a son if he did not get lonely during all his years on the road. He replies: "Lonely? Loneliness goes with the territory." Educators profoundly if unintentionally affect the identities, the values, and the personal esteem of students through the hidden curricula of schools; affecting the whole human being inexorably goes with the territory of formal education. Further, it is perfectly obvious that people grow and live in

three dimensions. Adolescents do not go to school, or live outside it, simply from the neck up. To conceive of education on one dimension only — mind (*or affect, or character*) — is myopic, neglecting the way people grow and live. It is arguing the obvious to say that we have to put mind-body and mind-other dualisms aside.

Finally, and by definition, people whose development and education are whole will be more responsible and competent socially. While it may be committing the naturalistic fallacy, any careful analysis of the “higher” stages of ego, moral, or social development indicates that an enlarged social perspective and responsibility, acceptance of social convention and law, an effort to consider others’ rights and to be fair, and individuation responsive to principle are at the heart of an individual’s development.

A holistic conception of education for human development, then, guards against idolatry of intellect, of joy, of the sensate, of morality, of political action, or of any singular conception of what about human beings is of most worth. Educational dualisms, whether they be mind-body, mind-affect, or another, become pointless. The answer to each aspect of growth is yes. Morally, how can educators deny each individual the right to maximum growth? It is clear that this position commits the naturalistic fallacy; let us hope it gets away with it. Whatever is in the process of human development — an interrelated progression along the major dimensions of human thinking and behaviour — should be reflected in a comprehensive set of educational experiences that will support and stimulate cognition, morality, emotions; ego, social life, career; the aesthetic, and the physical. Seeing human development in its whole potential and sequence guards against giving educational support to unbridled individualism. The aim of enhancing all-around and optimal human growth may also guard against the other pole of that dualism: educating people solely to be conventional.

Learning self-contempt

Profound and recurring questions about the size of the American high school, its curricular priorities, and its adverse effects on students’ development, are also a part of the case for developmental education. My view is that schools, whether city, suburban, or rural, have tended to define their role as the transmitters of academic ideas and skills. Recent efforts at reform have been directed toward revitalizing the existing academic curriculum and its teaching. Little intellectual energy or funding has been directed toward reformulating education — developing essentially new curricula and new forms of educating adolescents. In most schools and in most eras the personal side of education has had a lower priority than the academic. There has always been extensive rhetoric about individual growth, but in fact any personal or psychological development was largely the result of random and inimical forces in the school. It is obvious that

poor black and white children have indelibly learned to regard themselves with self-contempt as a result of schooling.⁶

The real question is how well the American high school is achieving either the academic or the personal and social development of its students. Passow⁷ has recently summarized both the indictment and the proposals for change in our high schools. I am aware that criticism is easy while constructive reformulation of education is complex, hard work. Nor do I have a temperamental need to change institutions that are working; indeed, I think we do so at great cost. But, if educators cannot point with certainty to any significant benefits that the high school provides its students, and if the human costs appear to be negative for many poor black and white teenagers, then the profession is between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

Thus, we return to the summary case for developmental education. It derives from a conception and belief that the education of the person must be whole: it must stimulate cognitive or intellectual growth, moral reasoning and action, emotional growth, social skills, vocational competencies, aesthetic and spiritual development, and a sound body. The basic purpose of education is overall ego or personal development within a democratic society. The explicit assumption is that all people are equal before the law and have a moral right to an education that will fully develop their potential. Only such an education is truly democratic.

Reform, innovation, or revolution?

The traditional academic curriculum, by contrast, is elitist and may very well be hollow at the core of its proudest claim — that it teaches adolescents to think. The argument is not that the traditional system be eliminated. To the extent that the academic disciplines can be demonstrated to stimulate human rationality, morality, and social consciousness, they have a significant place in developmental education.

Education for all-around adolescent development inevitably leads us beyond reforming the courses and teaching of the traditional disciplines. New courses for adolescents — for example, in women's development, child study, and teaching, and the psychology of counselling — plus systematic experience in social service and political action in the community, are a first and very effective genre of innovation. Yet they leave the high school little altered as an institution. And the school as a political, social, and ideological institution profoundly affects the growth both of the children who study in it and of the adults who teach in it. Dewey saw that. All of the contemporary analyses of school climate point to the deep and subtle effects on adolescents of that hidden curriculum; the high school works its will on students in countless direct and covert ways. By its size, by its management; by its rules and discipline; by its standardization of, or success in individualizing the curriculum and teaching; by its schedules; by its

evaluation of students; by the way it treats athletes, girls, minority students, those who do well academically; and, more than anything else, by its assertion of what is most important for students to know and to be. To ignore the effect of these hidden persuaders on children is impossible. To know how to rationalize them better takes a little longer.

Democratic student governance of schools and classrooms, and student participation in building schools where people care about one another and the common good, are “the cutting edge” innovations now being tried by developmental educators. So too are joint efforts with parents to democratize the family of the adolescent. Such practices have moved substantially beyond the armchair status. They are the subject of much applied research and of several books.⁸ Cumulatively, then, developmental education offers many proven ways to promote the all-around growth of adolescents; and these programs work in concert with the principal institutions — formal education, the school, the peer group, the family and the community — which affect adolescents’ coming of age. While such innovations lead to schools which are run differently, and to learning environments outside the school, they are fundamentally compatible with existing social and school arrangements. And if the schools ignore such changes, out of inertia or the pursuit of “basics”? Then I agree with Purpel. “Only two alternatives would seem left — further stagnation, or reform of a more radical nature.”⁹

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NOTES

1. E. Dulit, "Adolescent Thinking à la Piaget: The Formal Stage," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 1 (No. 4, 1972), pp. 281-301.
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7. A. Harry Passow, "The Future of the High School," *Teachers College Record* 79 (September 1977), pp. 15-31.
8. Ralph L. Mosher, ed., *Adolescents' Development and Education: A Janus Knot* (Berkeley: McCutchan, 1979).
9. David Purpel, a Review of *Adolescents' Development and Education: A Janus Knot*, in *Moral Education Forum*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Fall, 1979), pp. 29-31.

