

WHERE THE HIGH SCHOOL YOUTH ARE

The rapid social change of the past two decades has left parents and teens in many ways far apart; this has been called the greatest change between generations in history. One way to view where the high school youth are is in relation to these changes.

The knowledge explosion, and some (often slow) improvements in the teaching-learning process, have resulted in a downward drift of subject matter from college to high school to junior high to elementary grades. What many of us learned in college is now routine in high school, and the sophistication of science, for example, taught in the sixth grade can be startling.

The young people see this both as a burden and a delight. Students feel pressure to produce within the educational system in direct relationship to the nature of parental expectations. Teenagers see their parents with a crystal ball; they know if the motivation is first to reflect glory on the parent or first to bring satisfaction of achievement and a feeling of personal worth to the child. The best achievers, (in accordance with native gifts), and the most put together kids are those, as you would expect, who are secure in their parents' love and acceptance, no matter what grades they get. The most shattered are those whose parents operate at either extreme--punitive or uncaring. If you ask students which is harder, they will tell you they'd rather be punished than treated as though they weren't there.

Remarkably good things which relate to this great proliferation of knowledge are happening in schools. More flexible designs of the learning climate, are making available to the teen who is motivated, and who may be, but is not necessarily bright, extraordinary opportunities to learn on his own, at his own rate. In some high schools, independent study programs now release Seniors from all classes for half a year to pursue a topic submitted in formal proposal, and resulting in a written report similar in length and complexity to a masters' thesis.

No generation has had the choices of life work that American youth has today. But many choices do not mean ease of decision--quite the contrary. A weakness in our whole system of life work and preparation for it can be illustrated this way: A just-turned-seventeen year old boy is exploring with his guidance counsellor the question of his schedule for his Senior year. "Does he know what he wants to be? Does he have a special interest area?" No, not particularly. The system says he must choose a college with career in mind, and that he can't make up his program until he's chosen a college. And so he selects as general a college program as he can, and lets the real choosing wait. Good often results, but there are a lot of anxious Junior boys, and some girls, though girls are generally less pushed by this. Fortunately college educators and some parents are no longer thunder struck at the "year off" during college, to help the growing person achieve what he couldn't, or possible shouldn't, as a Junior in high school.

I have not been able to find a well considered estimate of the number of visibly workless young people. Because they are publicized, they have an impact on the thinking of high schoolers out of proportion to their number, I feel sure. What leads to periods of aimless, uncommitted, often wandering idleness? I submit at least these: irrelevance of high school programs, (as students view life), lack of understanding of getting and spending money or the satisfaction of work, (perhaps you have read James Michener's The Drifters), and finally, no feeling of being related to a plan, or part of a fabric in family, society or cosmos. Of course there is a considerable number of high school kids who hold jobs, but students are expressing feelings that work must have more meaning and value for it to be worth much effort, and it must be decidedly more personal.

The mass media, especially television, have come to exert an influence on young people often as great as parents or peers. The pleasure mania, exalted from dawn to the late, late show/^{makes} its mark on the pre-schoolers on up with shouted promises of sugar-coated everything. There is the same approach to

leisure, for which we are so far not doing a great deal in education. Young people can often be heard with, "There's nothing to do around here", suggesting that for those without cultivation of inner resources, more leisure will be more of "nothing to do."

No generation has known such mobility. The family moves, its members travel and the driver's license has become a cultural rite of passage.

No generation has been so overfed and undernourished, primed with sugars, fats and preservatives. Food producers and processors, not educators or scientists, are changing our food habits, and generally not for the good. The food industry uses the media, particularly television, to create demand for profitable products. For example, 96% of American homes have a TV set; the average pre-schooler watches 35 hours a week, thereby making TV the dominant teaching force in the lives of our young children. Most of the teaching is about what to eat; on Saturday and Sunday mornings, the child sees an average of 22 commercials, and of these as high as 87% are for food products.¹

We are seeing alarming food patterns in high schools. The poorest fed in our country are the adolescent girls; their mothers follow a close second. This country has a relatively poor infant mortality rate, (at one time we were the best), and an appalling life expectancy for men. There are 34 countries in which the average male, at birth, can expect to live longer than he will in the U.S.² Because there is much still unknown about human nutrition, we must assume present patterns are having uncountable effects on physical stamina and psychic outlook.

No generation has before known the full impact of material advantage and emotional intensity of the nuclear family--the unit of mother, father and children. In such a setting there are not the safeguards of a variety of tempera-

1. Gussow, Joan Nutrition Education--Is There Any Other Choice? Paper presented at the Annual Meeting, American Home Economics Association, Atlantic City, June, 1973

2. Ibid.

ments. There remains the unconscious assumption that emotional needs will be met nevertheless, and this often becomes burdensome.

No other generation has seen the sharp demarcation of age groups--the stratification into teens, young marrieds, empty nest, elderly. No generation of high school students has been more painfully aware of their parents', particularly their mothers', confusions as to role and paths to self-actualization. This is both aided and aggravated by women's lib.

We are just beginning to spend the precious time of college-bound students to help them discover the basis for the prediction that essentially all of the girls will be employed for 20 years of their lives. This is one implication drawn from the fact that, on the average, the last child is being born to the American woman when she is 27 years old.

The middle class child is often left to wonder what his father does, what "work" is, and therefore what it means to be a man. Graham Blaine, head of Psychiatric Services at Harvard, states that between the ages of three and six the child's sex role identification becomes established.¹ How many, by six, can relate to the nature of their absent father's work?

At long last a substantial effort, with funding from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, just in the lift-off stage, is being made toward education for parenthood. While data accumulate indicating that our major social burdens stem more from the quality of nurture than nature, and while rates of crime, delinquency, mental illness rise, the public education system has stood, for the most part, unconvinced that increased knowledge and insight relating to human development, to social-emotional growth, to the "affective domain" should claim any of a student's time. College requirements and parental anxieties have contributed to this.

But the kids are eager for it. There is no problem keeping attention in

1. Blaine, Graham Youth and the Hazards of Affluence Cambridge, Mass. Cambridge Press 1967

a class which is discussing Bettelheim's claim that one result of physical punishment is violence in the streets,¹ or the fact that there are societies in which such punishment is unknown.

The most spectacular aspect of young people's lives in recent years has been, of course, the misuse of drugs. Just now, teens are shifting back to alcohol. It is safer, both biochemically and legally. They see a good deal of heavy drinking and alcoholism around them, but almost never relate the possibility of this addiction to themselves. Marijuana is easily available and is here to stay. In high school there is little use for education about effects of specific drugs or alcohol; kids just turn this off. But they are most enthusiastic about understanding better their feelings, what motivates people and how to develop satisfying interpersonal relationships. This is a rising plea for the study of the behavioral sciences at the secondary level. Some high schools are now offering courses in psychology, sociology and comparative religions.

Perhaps the most astonishing misconceptions among middle class teens relate to money. Some express this in a kind of resignation that money is simply beyond managing, and that's why we have credit. Others claim to know what they are worth in the market place and what it costs to live, and then quote ridiculous figures. And they usually see the only reason for education after high school as getting a good job and earning higher pay.

Many a teen in a white high school is aware of the unreality of the situation. He studies Piri Thomas and Martin Luther King, he intellectualizes about equal opportunity and desegregated schools and open housing, but he goes home to powerful forces which suddenly are no longer latent when rumor has it that a black family is moving in down the street. He will cross date, he'll write a paper on mixed marriage, he'll profess willingness to adopt a cross racial baby, but he does not expect parental or sibling blessing if he acts

1. Bettelheim, Bruno "Hypocrisy Breeds the Hippies", Ladies Home Journal, March, 1968

on these beliefs. He does make friends among blacks and Puerto Ricans. The high ability, perceptive students, some of whom are philosophically the best candidates for cross-racial relationships, have the most difficulty establishing them because so very few dark skinned young people are their intellectual peers.

Students now in high school, in large numbers, are afraid of marriage. They see family stress, disruption, divorce all around them. The present figure is disconcerting: of every three marriages now performed, one will end in divorce. And so the young person wants to "try it first." In 1967, in a controversial article by Margaret Mead for Redbook Magazine, the proposal was made that we institute a two-stage marriage, by contract, in which the first stage was without children, in other words, a trial, but a socially acceptable legal commitment. Two years later, Dr. Mead wrote a "Continuing Dialogue" in which she suggested that, under the present body of family law, the best procedure was to marry and risk a later divorce. Many couples are delaying the arrival of children, thereby fulfilling the spirit of Dr. Mead's two stage contract. At the same time, about 28% of American brides are pregnant, a poor launch for marriage.

For boys in high school, marriage is very far away indeed. But girls easily project themselves into the wife and mother roles, and they are chilled at the high risk of bringing up children without a father. Research increasingly indicates serious, usually subtle, effects, often emerging years later, on children who do not have the models of loving, committed male and female parents or parents-alternate. (We can afford to ponder the child-parent and parent-parent interaction that permits capacity and willingness for commitment to be caught, perhaps more than taught. Some of us who see large numbers of teenagers feel much concern about the number of them who have little sense of constructive commitment.)

The primary misconception about pre-marital sexual activity among high

school students is that "everybody is doing it." The powerful need for peer acceptance often prompts students to hide their true feelings from each other so that they can appear to be "with it." Polls in which anonymity is carefully guarded indicate that about 35% of the girls and 50% of the boys have intercourse before graduation from high school. It's a great comfort to students to learn that there is plenty of room for them if they choose to refrain.

Another misconception is that this generation of young people (perhaps in the last ten years) is more sexually active than their parents. Reiss, in his article, "The Sexual Renaissance"¹ states that premarital sexual activity has changed very little, but open discussion of it has enormously increased. Actually, sociologists feel that the major change in this behavior occurred among women in the 1920's, accompanying the then women's liberation that came with the right to vote. (Students laugh when they say, "So it was great-grandma.") Reiss also states, incidentally, that "no society of which we are aware has ever been able to bring a majority of its males to marriage as virgins."²

There is no area, with the possible exception of religion or the choice of a career, where there is more earnest search going on than in sexual behavior. They would like to find a way, but the anxiety of the conflict is understandable when we realize that, on the one hand, many boys and most girls are still conditioned from early years to believe that sex is for marriage, and on the other hand, the peak of sexual urgency arrives for the boy when he is about 18, and though for the girl, this comes 10 years later, still she has strong cultural and emotional impetus to please. She is also not immune to the significance of women's lib.

Technically, the control of reproduction has arrived; emotionally it has

1. Reiss, Ira "The Sexual Renaissance" The Journal of Social Issues
April, 1966

2. Ibid.

not, at least among sexually active high school students. A few boys take this responsibility; a few girls are on the pill. The risk-taking that is a part of being young is prevalent here, aided by still remaining shocking ignorance of physiology. (Teens claim vehemently this isn't true, but many are stumped by rather simple questions about the reproductive process.) Fortunately biology teachers are now including this, a relatively recent development, and reproductive education is being offered in some 4th and 5th grades.

Therefore the effective use of contraceptives is a problem of decision-making and need anticipation, not of technical availability. There are social agencies which will, under a doctor's care, prescribe and supply contraceptives for a few dollars to any teenager, without knowledge or consent of the parents. Whatever you may think of this, it is evident that the prevention of unwanted pregnancy is within reach, but only if the will to apply it can emerge. Reis¹ and several others state that there is no evidence that withholding contraceptives reduces sexual activity.

The idealistic teenage girl looks with revulsion on abortion, at least until she has herself had, or been close to, a suspected pregnancy. But abortions are occurring in high school. Here again, parental support makes the difference between a devastating and an endurable experience. It is heartwarming to see parents rise to this situation, and many of them do, magnificently.

There is unresolved controversy among boys and girls as to which one, in a partnership, should take the responsibility for contraception or the abortion decision. In relationships where there is real affection (and don't underestimate young people's capacity for this), boys usually share the responsibility. I have heard girls suggest that this might be one way to detect how much love is really involved.

Love is not an easy concept for teens to grasp. Our language is little help, as we love our cars, clothes, hairdos, books, dogs, parents and sweethearts. In students' definitions of love, the common thread is giving, service, unselfishness. They find Eric Fromm's four elements, as he describes them in his "Art of Loving", to be helpful: "Care, responsibility, respect and knowledge." Only occasionally now do we hear the Cinderella comment. "Love is too sacred to dissect like this."

Within constitutional restraints, it is possible to explore varying religious views of students, provided they feel no coercion. Most students profess a belief in God, some have never thought about what they believe. Many separate religion from the church, and there is a good deal of resentment at being made to spend "stupid" hours in church, and at having dogma forced upon them. A considerable number of students I see are having a rewarding experience attending Young Life, and through it, some are thinking and talking of Jesus as a close-by friend. There is at this age some interest in world religions; for a few, this is a real enthusiasm. A small percentage of high school students is happily active and involved in their family church.

Death as an area of study has emerged very recently, certainly within the decade. Departments of Thanatology are appearing at universities, as are articles about death and dying in the popular press. Students' anonymous evaluations express gratitude for time spent discussing grief as a process, understandable step by step. With rare exception, the kids speak of an after life of some sort, and most of them see dealing with death, of a loved one or one's own, tied closely to one's religious convictions. They can grasp the concept of separation anxiety as a universal experience, and of trust and self-assurance as its balance wheels.

These are some of the thoughts and feelings of middle class high school students, as seen by one classroom teacher. You can probably surmise how often she is impatient to put the *Uantia Book* into a student's hands. So many of their hopes and fears and yearnings are addressed in the book. But

one must remember that 2000 pages are formidable, the Urantia prose is beautiful but challenging, and this is a young generation with more viewers than readers. I have had limited success in bringing students to look at the book, although it has been in our school library for a year and is on my reading list. Charles Olivea, who this year taught a high school social religion and studies course in/the supernatural, referred often to the book in class, made several copies available, but admits that, "They are not ready."

However, there is a way. It is an axiom in teaching that we start with the student where he is; it is another that he has his own pace. Therefore, to become as sensitive as one can to a young person's needs is the first step. The second is to provide a setting where he feels his emotional and spiritual space have not been transgressed, and that this setting is being designed by someone who cares.

A list of references, carefully selected (how could this be done without the Concordex?) and tailored to the individual student and his particular interest or concern, can be effective. Twice I have had this lead a student to dip into other parts of the book, like Betsy who left a note on my desk, "I always did wonder who Adam and Eve were."

Perhaps one of us will one day find the delightful leisure to prepare a "Topical References to the Urantia Book for High School Students." There will be many who will be grateful.

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