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Social-Medical Problems of Youth —

VIEWPOINT OF THE EDUCATOR

SISTER M. MARGARITA, O.P., Ph.D.

As a teacher, I have dealt with high school and college youth for the past fifteen years. Certainly a teacher at any level is doing far more than bringing together areas of knowledge and disembodied minds of children. Most of you are parents; in this capacity you too are educators. But the classroom teacher works with children in a context that is unique . . . it must be or there is no need for the school. Basically, it is the intellectual development of the child for which he is responsible to the parents who entrust their children to him. But we must also recognize that it is a "whole child" whom he encourages toward the acquisition of truth . . . the child with innate emotional and social needs that are met or thwarted in the school environment.

I need not point out to you the upsetting social disturbances that are almost becoming par for the course on our college and university campuses today. We could argue for days about whether these are evidences of intellectual development or roadblocks against actually acquiring it. Nor will I attempt an analysis of the causes and symptoms of the many psychological illnesses that are evident among our teenage population. I would like to direct your attention to some prob-

lems for the child in our American schools that are due to the system itself, not the home or neighborhood or even the proficiency (or lack of it) of teachers or administrators. I point out these problems only in the hope that you, as educated professional leaders in your communities, as well as persons deeply involved in the personal affairs of its citizens, will lend a helping hand or voice or vote when improvements are proposed.

First, there is an all-out, nationwide drive today to keep every boy and girl in high school until graduation, and I feel almost subversive as I say it, but I do not think this is even a humane proposal, not to speak of being a practical one. There are thousands of young people sitting in classrooms these days, driving teachers toward the brink of desperation . . . children who care less about learning to speak or write correctly than I would care about piloting a jet . . . children who should be working at unskilled jobs for their own development in habits of self-discipline and thrift, who, five years from now might be personally motivated enough to return to adult classes to learn English grammar, rhetoric, history and perhaps even some mathematics. I know, automation is reducing by thousands each year the number of unskilled jobs available, but I simply cannot counten-

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ance the waste of talent on the part of well-educated and dedicated teachers who are in some cases managing something more like a house of correction than a classroom for learning. It hardly seems fair to say "draft youth at sixteen" but it seems criminal to force them to stay in halls of learning against all sane rules of fair treatment to one class of American professional people who are not free to say "take your business elsewhere" as you are! Not to speak of the morale of the children who really WANT to learn something in those same classrooms! It is economically advantageous to keep these youngsters off the labor market, and we have many elderly citizens who need those jobs, but is this really intelligence, not to speak of justice?

Second, I wonder if you have thought how increasingly difficult it is becoming for young people to make mistakes in life. A college junior wrote me about this. She said, "It is part of becoming mature to fall flat on your face occasionally. I wish we could try a course at the risk of failing it, just to see if we could do it. We are discouraged from aiming at the stars in school because we dare not fail. Rank in class, grade-point average—these things are criteria for acceptance or rejection in the next step forward. How can I learn my limitations unless I am free to fail, or at least fall short of high achievement?"

Third, ask any teacher today what the strongest motivating force in school learning is, and I think he will say "grades." There is competition in schools today between

students that makes the spartan rigors of the Latin Grammar School look like a bed of roses. When I watch third graders in rapt attention in a geography class, learning about South America because it is exciting and personally rewarding just to know about South America, I cannot help thinking, "If they could only avoid the socialization that twists them into considering learning as a means rather than an end." There can be cut-throat competition too in the 9th grade algebra class and the 12th grade journalism class in reciting, doing extra-credit work, achieving high grades, and similar marks of distinction. What? Unfortunately, we can turn back to the teacher and blame him for some of it . . . he knows that using grades as a threat brings results. The father, too, who told his first-grade son to "learn to read well so you can get into college" wasn't helping matters much in supporting that little boy as he confronted one of the most challenging and arduous learning experiences of his life. One almost feels naive in mentioning the value of "learning for its own sake" in the light of such pressures toward external achievement in today's school world. We moan about apathy, but who dares to get too involved when the stakes are so high, unless he is sure of coming out on top?

Fourth, it has been stated, and I quote, "chronological age is no guarantee of physical, social and emotional development." I would like to add "nor is it any guarantee of intellectual development." And yet, since the 16th century, we have

been packaging our children into grades according to chronological age and assuming that this is a reasonable way of grouping them for learning. To persuade ourselves that we were sensitive to individual differences, we have become excited about homogeneous grouping in the high school, leveling children into "tracks" according to performance on tests demonstrating academic potential, achievement level or reading proficiency. The most progressive schools, generally, are instructing children this way today. We assume that high-achievers in these tests should take highly-gearred courses across the board—English, social studies, mathematics, foreign language and science. But a very real fact remains ignored. We are still assuming that a fifteen-year old has a fifteen-year total of academic achievement—no more, no less. Recently the nation's newspapers carried an article describing an "ungraded" high school in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Knowing the psychological sense behind the organization of that school, I could picture psychologists across the nation rising to cheer as they read about it. This is what they have said for years was the only reasonable way to group children for learning . . . disregard age entirely and group them according to tested achievement, keeping the groups open for students to move up and move out. Here is a reversal of the idea of keeping children almost trapped in school . . . rather, says the principal of an ungraded high school in Melbourne, Florida, "Let's not keep them in high school; let's

get them out!" In other words, let them advance or not advance, according to their individual capacity. In the upper years of high school, and you may decide three or four years are best for adequate social and emotional maturity upon leaving high school, give them more electives or advanced placement courses which carry college credit. Let the slow children learn with slow children, no matter what their chronological age. Drop the grading system entirely . . . organize an area of learning like English or American history into fifteen or twenty or thirty phases and let movement into a new phase be the only indication of achievement. Parents could be informed as to whether the child is doing satisfactory or unsatisfactory work. Parent conferences are the best way to do this, I feel. Surely there are many administrative and teaching problems that would have to be solved, but these are absolutely nothing compared to the relief from pressures exerted by parents and school and social stigmas of failure that this type of system could bring about.

Fifth: Young people today are more impatient than ever before in our history. They feel that they have to take what they can when the opportunity arises, because they have slim hope that a similar opportunity will come their way. More and more students each year are products of a number of elementary and secondary school systems . . . mobile families mean many uprootings for young people. There is an awesome depersonaliza-

tion going on in education that we must recognize and do something about. . . . Their numbers demand attention and one large school is cheaper to build than three small ones. It could be that a particular student is better known by a graduate-student dormitory counselor because the university is so concerned about the monster of size than if he attended a college of 900 where personal contacts were presumed rather than promoted. But the struggle is with us, in education, not to let children become faceless I.B.M. numbers.

In conclusion may we state the moral and religious problems of today's youth, in the school setting, are much as they have always been, with variations in degree in some instances. The cult of conformity and of relativism in values is certainly more pronounced than ever before. Teachers wish that more parents would be willing to act their age, be parents, and place demands on their children. Youngsters really want to do the right thing, and they hunger for good example, inspiration and guidance. Woe betide the teacher or counselor who tries in any way to criticize the example set by a student's par-

ents for him . . . he will defend them out of great loyalty that is wonderful to see, even though he knows they are wrong. Teachers cannot replicate parents and most do not want to. They do try to give children the great gift of having confidence in them — trust and profound respect — because each child is unique and his spirit is immortal. We give them understanding, Pierre Babin in his priceless book, *Crisis of Faith*¹, speaks of education through understanding. "Understanding someone is above all striving for a certain outlook, a presence and relationship. It is a mixture of humility and awareness, friendship and trust, silence and absolute hope in the other. To understand is to 'stand under' i.e. to support. It is to set out with the other in a common direction, to accompany him . . . to understand is to listen so intently that we confront the other's potentialities through the quality of the relationship we establish with him."

You ask for help in working with young people. They are their own best teachers. Listen to them.

¹Babin, Pierre. *Crisis of Faith*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1963. p. 163.