

## YOUTH AND THE WORLD OF WORK

"The renewal of the Christian school calls for relevance to contemporary culture... an openness to the life of the world..." A Declaration: *The Brother in the world to-day*.

"If the schools have any function, any justification, it is to prepare young people for the future. If it prepares them for the wrong future it cripples them" — Alvin Toffler in "The School Administrator," April 1983.

"...John Dewey... had seen the division of education into vocational training and the academic curriculum as reflecting the division of labour inherent in a class-divided society." H. Svi Shapiro, in *Harvard Educational Review*, August, 1980.

Among other goals a good school will seek to prepare its students for the future, preparing them to some extent for earning their living and for life in a world which by high technology is undergoing a revolution at least comparable to those effected by the end of feudalism and by the flowering of the industrial revolution. In this paper we shall consider chiefly the first of these goals, what, broadly speaking, might be called vocational education, but we shall not be able to evade completely the impact of the second. For the present purpose the words school, schooling and education will be used interchangeably. The importance of the Christian religious element in education is presumed.

There is a very large body of information on vocational counseling and training in the US. The current volume of Books in Print lists nearly 1,000 titles. The January, 1983, catalogue of the Educational Research Information Clearing House (ERIC) carries abstracts of about 400 studies by state and federal departments, universities and private agencies. The Education Index lists almost 700 articles on vocational training and counseling published in professional journals in 1982. The latest catalogue of the US Government Printing Office has over 400 government publications in these fields, from pamphlets of a few pages to thoroughly researched volumes.

In all this there are extensive accounts of everything needed to pursue any profession, career, trade, job opportunity, requirements, preparation. There are guidelines for starting a small business and for running a family farm. There are studies of priorities in inner city vocational education, of federal subsidies for medical training and for training teachers of agriculture in Iowa. There are evaluations of courses and opportunities for computer programmers, dentists, and electricians. In short, there is a vast store of information of value to students, parents, counselors and educational planners on vocational training and preparation for the world of work.

Traditionally the secondary high school in the United States has sought to ready students for the future by providing college preparatory programs in the same institution with business and commercial curricula. In fact, the earliest of the Christian Brothers' schools, working in large cities with the sons of immigrants and the poor, were exemplars of this model. The theory is obvious: that this is a sound and relatively inexpensive way to provide for different levels of ability and different careers in an ambiance conducive to social unity. The larger public

systems also included specialised vocational and trade schools at both the secondary and junior college level. Various industries in a given area conduct job training, and specialised trade schools are operated by private enterprise often at fairly high tuitions.

From this plethora of information and from generations of experience with this variety of schools two sets of goals for life/work planning have emerged. One stresses job performance: competence, good work habits ability to accept correction and follow directions, loyalty to the employer, minimal academic skills. The second set is quite different. It includes fairly high levels of literacy, by which is meant ability to read and interpret fairly complex sets of directions and to listen with comprehension; a good level of math skills and ability to develop them; capacity for decision making and sound judgment.

About 25 years ago, dissatisfied with what he saw as an inadequate attempt to achieve these two goals and to do so in an atmosphere conducive to both overall excellence and a democratic society, James Conant proposed the "comprehensive" school. Eliminating small academies and separated trade schools, this was to be a large institution combining the best of academic, business and trade courses. Students of all levels of ability and career orientation mingled freely, and were assigned indiscriminately to certain programs. Other programs challenged the brightest, and still others provided preparation for careers in business and trade, even for the least gifted. In an atmosphere of equality and multiple opportunity everyone would be prepared for a satisfying and useful life.

The practical approach taken by individual institutions in preparing students for the transition into the world of work has depended on local conditions, the needs of the community which the school serves, and the resources available. Models and ideas developed elsewhere have their value, but the actual implementation must be determined by a proper assessment of local conditions.

Achieving this twofold goal presents a special challenge to the American Catholic schools with their limited resources. The goals must be integrated. Where only the first is pursued vocational education becomes liable to the Dewey/Shapiro charge cited at the beginning, that its real purpose is to stratify social class and create a docile workforce for industry. But where the second is properly implemented, for example, by routine use of I:Q. and mere ability testing, the slow learner is not seen as a putative late bloomer, and the school becomes another unwitting agent for stratification of social class. A good education will prepare students to earn a living but not by teaching them a job while in the common school. Respect for persons, an essential characteristic of the Christian school, demands of a system of education which, while recognising that individual differences must also mean recognising limitations, still strives to provide the fullest opportunity for all levels of ability.

The Constant study in the late 50's had made the large comprehensive high school, with its great mix of the academic, the commercial, the technical curricula, the ideal, but student motivation for academic excellence never fully materialised and many bright students were satisfied with a minimum of challenge, and filled their schedules with entertaining easy electives.

Those who began vocational, non-college programs changed their minds as graduation and the world of work approached. The 60's and 70's brought education for self-fulfilment and both college preparatory and vocational preparation work suffered. Nowadays the misguided look to the computer and high technology as an easy solution to problems of life and career planning.

The result has been confusion and mediocrity at all levels of education for no norm has been discernible. A "dis-learning society" has emerged documented in the recently released report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, entitled "A Nation at Risk."

"...educational reform should focus on the goal of creating a learning society. At the heart of such a society is the commitment to a set of values and to a system of education that offers each member the opportunity to stretch one's mind to its full capacity from early childhood through adulthood, learning more as the world changes."

In other words, the school must prepare the student for life in which a simple "how to do it" training will not suffice. No matter what shape education will take, the future and the world of work will belong to those with a very different kind of preparation.

Anticipating the Report and its findings by two years, the distinguished American educator and philosopher, Mortimer Adler, saw the cause in an inappropriate attention to the first of the goals we have considered: preparing for jobs at the level of the secondary school. Specialisation, (at so early an age) he says "is the disease of modern society." He then offered his solution, called the Paideia Proposal, which seems an adaptation of the medieval trivium and quadrivium. He divides all education into three programs: acquisition of organised knowledge, development of intellectual and learning skills and the improved understanding of ideals and values. All students would follow the same program, though provision for different ability levels would be made. All students would take physical education. There would be no trade schools as such, but students would be expected to master certain manual skills: cooking, sewing, carpentry, and have work experience.

Whatever the structure of the educational system needed now, no school which calls itself Christian can function as though we still live in the old world. Teachers and programs must help students look at their futures in a realistic way, in terms of the sort of reality which today's world of work has created. A whole, Christian view of each student as a person in the modern world demands this:

"The Christian school endeavours through its program of instruction to prepare its students for their professional life, for marriage and its responsibilities, for service to society and the Church. It makes known to them the great needs and aspirations of modern man. It encourages them to be competent in to-day's world..." (Declaration 47,2)

The suggestions are given only to provide foci around which discussion might be planned. There is no prioritization, no sequence and these questions, topics and activities should be adapted to local use. They do assume some preparation for any discussion.

1 - Prepare a list of what graduates of this school are doing since they received their diplomas 5, 15, 25 years ago.

Why do we not know more about our alumni?

What do they say about how this school prepared them for life and work?

2 - Tell the story of your own search for a job, a career, a profession. What helped you most?

3 - Which passage in the accompanying paper do you agree with most strongly? Why? Which do you oppose and why?

4 - How many of the current student body are working after school? In what jobs? What is the average earning? How are they using this income: current tuition? for college? for family or self support? Savings? Entertainment? Auto? Other?

5 - Does the school have any contact or cooperation with industry for job training, career counseling, etc.?

6 - Organize a "Career Day" featuring exhibits, talks, interviews with representatives of local business and industries. For students and parents (and teachers!).

7 - Evaluate publications for career counseling available in the library and in the counselors' offices.

8 - List the job-training programs and technical schools of this region, e.g., in junior college, and private schools, or industry-related. What evaluation is available on the quality and reliability of each?

9 - List the job-finding and counseling services available in the area. How reliable are they?

10 - How does this school foster decision-making skills? Foster judgment & critical thinking?

11 - What non-academic manual skills can be learned in this school?

12 - Discuss the Peidea Proposal of Mortimer Adler. There is a brief, excellent summary prepared by Adler himself in the July 1982 issue of "The National School Board Journal."

13 - Do academic and early vocational specializations, early separation by ability (de facto if not de jure), the proliferation of electives and less demanding academic programs, etc. impede or stimulate the growth of the learning society? Do they foster or promote equality or class structure, or are they in fact indifferent?

14 - Mortimer Adler says that the twentieth century has contributed the concept of "the equality of man universally" to his original list of great ideas. Do you agree?

15 - Discuss this proposition: "A good education prepares students to earn a living but not by teaching them a job while in the common school."

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**N.B.:** Addendum: Several UNESCO publications, which arrived at the writer's office too late for incorporation in the present text, will be of special interest and value to some people discussing the topic: "Youth and Work" (UNESCO - ISBN 92-3-101610-5). 171 p. with tables. "Youth in the 1980's" (UNESCO - ISBN 92-3-101885-X) 384 pages. - "Youth Prospects for the 1980's" (SS. 80/D-119/A). A synthesis. 47 p.