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Mid-Century Education Reform and the Character of Citizens

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The educational filmstrip *Practicing Democracy in the Classroom* (1953) begins with a narrator describing the place of public education in a crucial time period: “At the heart of our struggle to maintain and strengthen a democratic way of life are the nation’s schools. Now, as never before, American education is challenged to help prepare the new generation for the vital business of acting as free individuals in a free society.”¹ With that in mind, the film shows fictional citizens explaining what they expect from public education. Similar to the present, there were a range of responses: “Whatever else, my children ought to know when and where important events happened. Teach them the facts.” “Make them strong and healthy.” “My kid ought to do better than me.” “They ought to be taught to read and write good English.” Despite a wide variety of answers, the narrator informs viewers that almost all adults agree on one basic goal for all students: “Schools ought to turn out good citizens.” The filmstrip then visits a fictional history classroom in Michigan to show how educators could employ a democratic teaching method, something that “would produce better citizens while teaching subject matter.” In the history classroom, the teacher allows students to choose between three methods of instruction: authoritarian (teacher-led), laissez-faire (students doing whatever they wanted), and a democratic method. The students choose the democratic method, and begin their study of history by conducting group projects related to the problems of everyday living and the American way of life. In this scenario the group work provides students with an opportunity to develop individual and shared responsibility, while also teaching mutual respect. The main purpose of the group work is not merely the study of history but for students to develop democratic relationships with one another. As schools in the present revisit the importance of character education amid increasing demands for standardized testing, what can be learned from the connection between character and citizenship emphasized in earlier theories of education?

Practicing Democracy in the Classroom illustrates an education reform movement that took hold in post-World War II America.² The reform movement known as life adjustment education was intended by educational theorists to reform curriculum and teach practical life skills in the classroom. “Life adjustment education is designed,” noted J. Dan Hull of the U. S. Office of Education, “to equip all American youth to live democratically with satisfaction to themselves and

¹ *Practicing Democracy in the Classroom*, prod. Encyclopedia Britannica, dir. Theral T. Herrick and George Mills, 20 min. 44 sec., Encyclopedia Britannica, 1953.

² For a direct comparison see Edwin R. Carr, “Education for Life Adjustment Through Social Studies” in *Education for Life Adjustment: Its Meaning and Implementation*, ed. Harl R. Douglass (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1950), 110-133; Hugh B. Wood, “Social Studies in Life Adjustment Education” in *Life Adjustment Education in Action*, ed. Franklin R. Zeran (New York: Chartwell House Inc, 1953), 293-311.



profit to society as home members, workers, and citizens.”³ In practice this encouraged schools to adopt values of progressive education. Their approach to education was intended to take into account the needs of individuals, and the emphasis would be upon “direct pupil-teacher planning, sharing, and participation in real life experiences while seeking solutions to individual, social, and civic problems.”⁴ Students and teachers could consider, within a subject, how it was applicable to the world outside the classroom. After its inception at a conference discussing the future of vocational education, life adjustment gained the support of the U. S. Office of Education. In 1947 United States Commissioner of Education John W. Studebaker appointed a Commission for Life Adjustment Education for Youth which promoted education that would help guide youth and make school relevant to the life problems of teenagers. The Commission published materials and held national conferences to encourage what they believed was a more democratic curriculum.

From the outset life adjustment education was derided by critics for its concern with topics which appeared anti-intellectual. Contemporary historian Arthur Bestor, an opponent of progressive education, argued that the program intended to “eliminate intellectual training from the schools.”⁵ Members of the public expressed a similar alarm at the thought of practical skills education dominating the classroom. In response to an article published in *Time* magazine, one reader wrote: “If the group’s goal is to see that our nation’s youth is equipped merely with such utilitarian skills as the secrets of job hunting, the intricacies of homemaking, the mysteries of ‘practical’ English, and the essentials of physical fitness, then we as a nation have no right to call ourselves an educated people.” Removing traditional subjects was “to deny our cultural heritage.”⁶

Far from being superficial or merely utilitarian, however, I argue that character training in life adjustment education materials revealed a connection to citizenship that is lost in modern iterations of education reform. Further, the controversy over practical life skills education raised fundamental questions of citizenship and schooling, serving as a valuable precursor to the issues facing education today. As schools in the present seek to implement character education training, whether through popular programs such as Character Counts! or character report cards such as

³ J. Dan Hull, “Development of the Current Life Adjustment Movement” in Douglas, *Education for Life Adjustment*, 9.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵ Arthur Bestor, *Educational Wastelands: The Retreat from Learning in Our Public Schools* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1953), 83. See also Mortimor Smith, *And Madly Teach: A Layman Looks at Public Education* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1949); Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1963). Later, Christopher Lasch also criticized life adjustment education as part of the “undemanding programs of study” which emphasized “the cooperative habits considered indispensable to industrial success.” *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in the Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1978), 138.

⁶ Anson C. Piper, “Push Button Learning” *Time*, January 5, 1948.



those in KIPP charter schools, adjustment education can offer valuable insights connecting these issues to one another.

The Roots of Life Adjustment Education

Even before the mid-twentieth century, schools taught character and reformers sought to make education more practical.⁷ An influx of migrants from rural areas into America's urban centers and high numbers of immigrants altered the demographics of cities throughout the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Progressive reformers viewed public education as an opportunity to promote democratic citizenship. When famed educator John Dewey argued for the implementation of practical works into education, he was suggesting that the purpose of public schooling was not to simply educate the public but to instill democratic values.⁸ In a similar manner, the *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, developed by the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education in 1918, supported the notion that schools were obligated to help create personality types which would function effectively in American society.

Life adjustment education reform coincided well with the search for consensus that dominated American society during World War II and the start of the Cold War. Reliance on the authority of experts increased as individuals sought to make sense of their world amid the turmoil of war and geographic mobility.⁹ Commission members appointed by the U. S. Office of Education expressed concern about the holding power of public schools, noting that in 1940-41 only 73 percent of eligible high school age students were enrolled in public schools. While this may have seemed like a high number, the Commission wrote that "no other nation in the world has had a similar need for an informed and intelligent citizenry...They must be taught efficiency and devotion to the Nation's peculiar ideals and ambitions. These facts are more easily comprehended during war than during peace, but they are equally true in either period."¹⁰ Noting

⁷ The forms and purposes of schooling can be seen in Lawrence A. Cremin. *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); William J. Reese, *The Origins of the American High School* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), especially 162-181.

⁸ See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

⁹ Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 53. See also Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the 1950s* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 25-46; Wendy L. Wall, *Inventing the American Way: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ *Life Adjustment Education for Every Youth* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Security Agency), 11. *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies* Vol. 74, no. 2 (2013)



the many changes that occurred over the 1940s, educators suggested that the family had disintegrated and that schools needed to take on additional functions of personal development. Educators believed that young people needed more guidance, and this effort could not be left to chance.

Scholars continue to debate the impact of life adjustment education.¹¹ If life adjustment education did not permanently alter American education, it did provide a new set of questions for public consideration: What was the role of public schools in a time period fraught with national and international strife? What form of education produced the best citizens? And how might the character of citizens be promoted in the classroom?

Life Adjustment Education and Citizenship

While education scholars criticize life adjustment education for encouraging students to merely accept their position in life, source material suggests that the classroom materials were intended to offer thoughtful, open-ended discussion of how character functioned in everyday life. Many states used the same textbooks and filmstrips, and teachers covered similar topics in classrooms across the country.¹² The citizenship and character issues for teens were addressed in two major areas: democratic personal relationships and the emerging global role of the United States. As one popular textbook reminded teens, “one of your big tasks during the teen years is that of preparing to become a responsible citizen.”¹³

With life adjustment education’s emphasis on responsiveness to students as individuals, classroom materials offered opportunities for reflection, asking students how to explain and justify good citizenship. For instance, although a textbook recommended to teens that a “good citizen begins by being a good member of his family” that point was open to discussion in terms of meaning.¹⁴ Filmstrips such as *Family Life* (1949) and *Friendship Begins at Home* (1949) emphasize the

¹¹ For an overview of the debate see William G. Wraga, “From Slogan to Anathema: Historical Representations of Life Adjustment Education,” *American Journal of Education* 116, no. 2 (February 2010): 185-209. Also see Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1995); Andrew Hartman, *Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹² The Descriptive Reports of Vocational Education available at the National Archives Record Administration in College Park include California, Florida, Iowa, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Washington.

¹³ Gladys Gardner Jenkins, W. W. Bauer, and Helen Shacter, *Teen-Agers: A Health and Personal Development Text for All Teen-Agers* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1954), 272.

¹⁴ Ibid.



family as the locus of personal satisfaction if all family members act as equal contributors. In *Family Life*, the fictional family the Millers realize if they want their family to work, it should be run more professionally. They plan a weekly meeting schedule to go over budgets and divide responsibilities according to each individual's abilities and interests. The connection to a democratic society and citizenship is evident when the narrator declares that "although the strength of the family lies in unity each member has individual rights." Individual rights should not be infringed upon by others in the family, while privileges are achieved through fulfillment of familial obligations.¹⁵

Authors of educational textbooks also emphasized the obligations of effective citizenship and character outside the family. Despite the economic prosperity of the long 1950s, students were encouraged to consider the critical issues facing their generation. The textbook *Enjoying Health* acknowledged that "no other nation has attained as many comforts and conveniences of living for such a large portion of its population." Even so, "there are advances to be made before American ideals are attained. Each new generation enjoys the benefits that the past has produced and sees the problems that remain to be solved."¹⁶ Although examples of potential problems were provided in the textbook, the authors were not asserting what they believed should be the concerns of students. Rather they posited the idea of problems as a topic for discussion.

In connecting character and citizenship, many schools also considered the obligation of students to those throughout the world. For instance in Wisconsin, the Menasha Homemakers' club decided to make small cash donations instead of exchanging Christmas gifts, and used the money to send "packages of concentrated food and other necessities" to Brussels, Belgium, in 1946.¹⁷ In Corona, California, a school club adopted a seven-year-old Japanese war orphan, Kaneka Isa, through the Hiroshima Peace center. The entire student body donated 50 dollars, which provided a year of care, and sent her special gift packages.¹⁸ In Iowa students sent clothing to Korea and invited a college student from Nigeria to talk about his country.¹⁹

In these examples students were encouraged to think of their individual responsibility as citizens. They were encouraged to reflect on how, in their everyday life, they might act with good character and what their place as individuals was in relation to others, whether within a family, community, or world context.

¹⁵ *Family Life*, prod. Coronet Films., 9 min, 48 sec., Coronet, 1949.

¹⁶ Evelyn G. Jones, *Enjoying Health* (Chicago: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1952), 6.

¹⁷ Annual Homemaking Education Descriptive Report, City Division, Wisconsin, 1946-1947, p.15. Wisconsin Historical Society.

¹⁸ Annual Descriptive Report of the California Program of Vocational Education, California, 1957, Box 2, p. 21, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Md. (NARA)

¹⁹ Iowa State Home Economics Vocational Education Report, 1953-1954, Box 9 n. p. NARA



What Can be Learned From Life Adjustment Education?

In recent decades, proponents of character education suggest that the adoption of automatic behavior patterns is a key component of character training, rather than open-ended consideration of what character means in a student's current life. As education writer Alfie Kohn notes, "what goes by the name of character education nowadays is, for the most part, a collection of exhortations and extrinsic inducements designed to make children work harder and do as they're told...the point is to drill students in specific behaviors rather than engage them in deep critical reflection about certain ways of being."²⁰

The value of life adjustment education lies in its focus on individuals and its use of reflection as a pedagogical tool. Instructional materials encouraged students to reflect on what values, character, and citizenship meant in their own lives. Drawing on the experience of students offers a real-life resonance that cannot be matched with catchphrases or other training devices. In his research on character education, Michael H. Romanowski suggested that in order to be effective character education for high school students should be centered on relevant, real-life dilemmas that the students face.²¹ In a 2011 *New York Times* article about character education, some students suggested that character could and should be viewed as an issue of individual struggle. As one wrote, "true character cannot be achieved by listening to someone tell you what it is. Rather, it is something each individual must find on his/her own."²²

²⁰ Alfie Kohn, "How Not to Teach Values: A Critical Look at Character Education," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 78, no.6 (1997): 429.

²¹ Michael H. Romanowski, "Through the Eyes of Students: High School Students' Perspectives on Character Education," *American Secondary Education* 32, no.1 (2003): 17.

²² Shannon Doyne, Susannah L. Griffie and Holly Epstein Ojalvo, "Should Character be Taught? Students Weigh In" *New York Times*, October 18, 2011, <http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/18/should-character-be-taught-students-weigh-in/> (Accessed January 13, 2013).