

Advanced Placement and Missing the Point of High School

One of the most popular current innovations in secondary education goes under the heading of Advanced Placement. In this practice high school students take college level courses, either through their own school or at a local college campus. The rationale for this approach is that students can move more quickly through the educational system with the possibility of gaining a Bachelor's Degree one to three years ahead of the normal schedule. Thus young people can be graduating from college at the age of 20 or even earlier. The purpose of this article is to look at this practice from the perspective of the Education for Life philosophy that guides our Living Wisdom Schools.

In fact, the issue of Advanced Placement highlights one of the major distinctions between traditional educational practices and Education for Life. In Living Wisdom schools we look at the early part of life as consisting of four distinct periods or Stages of Maturity. The years from birth to age six are seen as the Physical or Foundation Years, from six to twelve as the Feeling Years, from twelve to eighteen as the Will Years, and from eighteen to twenty-four as the Intellectual Years. Each of these stages offers unique opportunities for balanced development. In our system the junior and senior high school years coincide with a focus on the development of the will, with the shift to the intellect not occurring until the age of eighteen.

The main argument for Advanced Placement is that students are not being challenged by the traditional high school curriculum, and it does seem fairly obvious that there is a growing tide of unrest in our schools. But does it really make sense to solve this dilemma by "fast-tracking" our brighter students into college level courses? These courses are designed to be sophisticated in nature. They delve into such topics as advanced scientific theory, in-depth historical inquiry, and exposure to

the great themes of literature and philosophy. The problem that is often overlooked is that the attainment of anything more than a superficial appreciation of these topics requires a level of life experience beyond that of almost all teenagers. Yes, it is possible to memorize facts and formulas and even gain a cursory acquaintance with the works of our greatest minds, but is that what we really want to call education?

We have only to examine our own lives to see that discussions on such topics as the meaning of life, the existence of evil, or the morality of cloning are much more likely to occur in our twenties than in our teens. In addition to developmental issues, there is once again the simple fact of life experience. And herein lies the basis for reevaluating our approach to high school. If life experience is what teenagers lack, and in fact crave (see the interest in sex, drugs, and any other available source of stimulation), why not construct programs that cater to this need in constructive ways?

From the Education for Life perspective the teen years are primarily about the development of the will, which translates directly into helping teens expand their experience of life. Instead of more time spent in classrooms, why not involve them directly in their communities through volunteer projects that show them how life works. Our teens rebel because the world we offer them is too small. They are bursting at the seams that represent the confines of their childhood. Why not show them other lifestyles than the one they have grown up in? Most teenagers who are slated for Advanced Placement courses have no real experience with the physically handicapped, the economically deprived, or even other cultures. If they have traveled, it is within the cocoon of their parents' lifestyle, without the chance to really interact in meaningful ways with the people and places they visit. During one of our high school's visits to a Mexican Orphanage, another group from the United States also stopped by. Our students had been living in an orphanage dorm for over

a week, getting up at 6am to help sweep and cook, and sharing all their meals and leisure time with the children who lived there. The other group was staying at one of the most expensive tourist hotels complete with swimming pools, saunas, and all the latest electronic gadgetry. Their “service project” which was the nominal reason for their trip, consisted in stopping by the orphanage for an afternoon to drop off some clothes and food without any chance to interact with the children.

Teenagers need experiences that stretch their boundaries and give them the chance to really see how life works. Local service projects, adventures in nature, trips to other places that are financed through their own efforts: these are a few of the offerings that can make high school more relevant. Yes, there is still a need for classes in history, chemistry, math, and English, but not on the level we expect from college students. Let’s save these more in-depth courses for the time when young people’s minds have matured to the point where they can take really take advantage of them.