

Our last column explored the content of education today. This one will explore the structure itself: addressing the big problem of Middle School.

Most of the country divides up children into Elementary School (kindergarten through 6th grade; Middle School 7th and 8th, High School 9th-12th). These divisions are supposed to track the physical and mental changes in children as they transition through these years. Today, however, information is pouring in about Middle Schools---in movies, reports from parents, and accounts from children themselves.

There is no doubt that hormonal changes are the great divide between children and adolescents, and there doesn't seem to be much adult help while children undergo these changes.

I never experienced Middle School, and from what I hear and read, I am so glad I didn't. My school system was in New York State from the 1940s to 1950s. My schools were all in Rochester, New York, in a city of 300,000, blessed with plenty of culture (much paid for by the George Eastman estate) and industries with a long life (Eastman Kodak, Bausch & Lomb, and Xerox). We had excellent museums and public libraries, a great music school, and a university.

The grade school system then was Kindergarten through 7th grade, the last grade before teen ages. I attended a public high school built during the Roosevelt Administration: a big school that brought together all the ethnicities then dominant in the city: Anglo-Saxon, German, Jewish, Italian, Polish. I do not remember any Black children in this particular school; the Black neighborhood was in another part of the city.

What was really different was that we were a five-year high school, 8th grade through 12th. The 8th graders were often short and physically transitioning, reaching their final heights by 10th grade. They were low man on the totem pole, and did not dare act out, fearing the scolding and scorn of our bigger schoolmates.

What I do not recall is hating going to school. We were collected in homerooms for our first class and these were numbered 8-1 through 8-whatever, and the school authorities insisted that these numbers did not indicate status. (This was not true. The 8-1s studied Latin and were identified as college material. I had a friend in 8-2, and he studied Spanish, not necessarily college bound.)

School was exciting, fun, our teachers were human beings to us, and often mentors. Our classmates were peers, and most of us did indeed go to college.

The miseries, bullying, and cliques of today's Middle Schools (Junior Highs) were missing. We all went through the same hormonal changes and difficulties of today's adolescents, but the acting out was missing. Nobody had to tell us not to bully. That was addressed in grade school by our teachers. And because we were all from working class or middle class families, we did not experience the economic disparities that automatically created differences.

I never discovered girls with cashmere sweaters and pearls who shunned the rest of us, or service groups called "Knights and Ladies" whose parents could afford the special clothes and activities they enjoyed, until I had my last two years of High School in California. It was a much more stressful environment than Rochester had been.

What brought this to mind was an article about a 13-year-old refugee from the Ukraine war who was in Middle School in San Francisco. She was horrified to observe the behavior, the bullying, acting out, rudeness to teachers, by these teens. She, and other refugees, were bullied, not welcomed. School was not like that in Ukraine.

The two years of home-schooling during the Pandemic, along with the introduction of social media, had turned otherwise vulnerable beginning adolescents into bullies and victims. The United States also underfunds its schools, particularly those of the less advantaged children. Education depends on zip code, unfortunately.

Adding to these already trying conditions, teachers are being bullied by stupid governors and bullying parents, both poisoning the learning experience of the already stressed children.

Middle School is a big mistake. Not a role model in sight just when they need them.

685 words

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