

A TECHNIQUE FOR DETERMINING PROBLEM AREAS FOR GENERAL EDUCATION IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL¹

Jean Victoria Marani
Sarasota County
Introduction

The function of the American secondary school is to provide all youth with educational opportunities geared to their abilities in order that they may become successful and productive members of our society. A portion of the curriculum deals with the experiences needed by all youth; another portion is directed toward nurturing individual talents and interests. General education is that portion primarily responsible for providing youth with opportunities to develop common skills, values, qualities, and understandings needed by all for effective citizenship. It is, therefore, required of all students. How to develop a curricular structure appropriate for general education prompted this study. Two concerns were paramount: (1) greater understanding of the problem-area structure for general education, and (2) development of a technique for determining problem areas. The research aspects of the study are presented on the following pages.

The writer contends that common citizenship competencies may best be developed when youth deal directly with the mutual problems of growing into adulthood. These problems occur as the adolescent recognizes conflict among his personal-social needs or between them and the values and demands of adult life impinging upon him. A problem area is defined as a broad area of living around which cluster these common and persistent problems of youth. It is, in the writer's opinion, an appropriate structure for general education.

Current Practices in the Use of Problem Areas

A survey was made of forty-six selected secondary schools to determine techniques for identifying adolescent problems for formulating problem areas, and to ascertain their value in the curriculum

¹Data for this paper were reported in Marani, Jean Victoria, "A Technique for Determining Problem Areas for General Education in the Secondary School," (Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Department of Education, The Ohio State University, 1958.

development process. Evaluation of questionnaire data from nineteen schools using the problem-area structure, as defined in this study, revealed that adolescents and adults were not frequently involved in direct study of adolescent problems.

The Problem-Area Study

Procedure

The writer contends that the problem-area structure requires extensive study of adolescent problems within the local school if it is to advance the reorganization of general education materially. The directing hypothesis of this study was that adolescents themselves and adults sensitive to their problems (their parents and teachers) should participate in identifying problems facing youth. Participation by a group of social scientists should strengthen the reliability of problems of wider social significance identified by other groups.

As a structure for adult questionnaires and as a framework for analyzing data, the writer formulated a series of Basic Areas of Responsibilities and Relationships which characterize adolescent development. The responses of teachers and social scientists supported the validity of these areas. The identification of many problems in each area further substantiated them. The nine areas, none of which is mutually exclusive, are listed below.

Basic Areas of Responsibilities and Relationships in Adolescent Development

1. Gaining maturity in meeting personal problems.
2. Achieving a more independent and responsible status in home and family relationships.
3. Developing successful and maturing relationships with other adolescents.
4. Developing new and successful relationships with adults.
5. Achieving satisfactory and appropriate school experiences.
6. Assuming increased participation and responsibility in community activities.
7. Developing competent participation and security in economic relationships.
8. Gaining understanding in meeting intergroup and intercultural relationships.
9. Developing a mature system of values.

The problem-area study was conducted in Sarasota, Florida. Questionnaires were completed by thirty of the forty-nine faculty members of Sarasota Junior High School and by thirty-four of the sixty-eight faculty members of Sarasota Senior High School. Ten per

cent of the parents in each school were mailed questionnaires. A total of fifty-five questionnaires were returned from 166 junior high-school parents and forty from 189 senior high-school parents (some parents had students in both schools). Ten per cent of the students enrolled in each school participated in the study. A total of 110 junior high-school and 132 senior high-school students responded to the Science Research Associates Youth Inventory and a problem survey. Five social scientists from Florida universities completed questionnaires.

Students were given a free-response problem survey on which to list the common problems of adult life they believed they would face and have to solve and the structured Science Research Associates Youth Inventory. These instruments yielded problems of immediate concern as well as those long-range aspects youth recognized. The adult groups were given a semi-structured problem survey, utilizing the above areas, to identify both immediate and long-range aspects of problems they believed all or most youth face--problems which should become the structure of general education.²

Analysis of the data

In determining adolescent problems, the range and variety of items identified by participants are of major significance in revealing those common to large numbers of youth. Frequency and consistency among groups are also significant. Consequently, data were analyzed to reveal these factors. Each group's responses were examined separately and then combined. Similar and identical problems were grouped to establish frequency and rank. These problem clusters were classified under one of the nine Basic Areas. By comparison and analysis of data from all groups, variations of problems, frequency, and consistency patterns were established.

The semi-structured questionnaires given adults revealed more consistency in comparison than with the students' less structured survey. The following patterns of responses illustrate this contrast.

Student responses:

Science Research Associates Youth Inventory. Highest ranking problems related to present school affairs and vocational and educational questions to be faced after high school.

Lowest ranking problems related to home and boy-girl relationships.

There were no significant differences among the responses

²Copies of these questionnaires may be secured from Jean V. Marani, Curriculum Director, Riverview High School, Sarasota, Fla.

of junior and senior high school students.

Student Problem Survey. Highest ranking problems related to school experiences, community and economic activities, and intergroup relationships.

Lowest ranking problems related to home life, values, getting along with adults, and personal problems.

Teacher responses:

Highest ranking common problems related to home and family relations, personal problems, and school concerns.

Lowest ranking common problems related to getting along with adults, intergroup and intercultural relationships, and concern about value-making situations.

There were no significant variations among responses given by junior and senior high-school teachers.

Parent responses:

Highest ranking common problems related to questions of a personal nature, home and family relationships, value-making situations, getting along with adults and assuming community responsibilities.

Parents of junior and senior high-school students responded similarly.

Social scientists' responses:

The responses of the five participants did not differ significantly from those of other adult groups.

In terms of specific problem clusters in each Basic Area, variations among groups are more prominent. The following items illustrate some of the contrasts.

- a. Only students identified problems of achieving peace and exploring space as significant in their lives.
- b. Only teachers and parents considered the achievement of popularity to be a problem for high-school students.
- c. No senior high-school student listed choosing friends wisely as a problem although his parents and teachers stressed it.
- d. Junior high-school teachers believed finding one's place in the family to be a teen-age problem; no parent did.
- e. Only three senior high-school parents believed securing recreational facilities a problem for teen-agers; no students did, but fifteen teachers listed it.

These and other variations stress the perspective from which the adolescent and adults in his environment appraise his problems. To build a curriculum from only one of these angles would scarcely be realistic or fair. Education must deal with the immediate problems youth recognize, but it also has the obligation to widen the area of concern and shared interests. Although some students see the larger scope of many problems, adult reactions reveal many facets not readily recognized by youth. Questionnaire data, in the writer's opinion, support the hypothesis that groups sensitive to adolescents and these same young people should participate in identifying their problems.

Formulating problem areas

The composite problem clusters from each group of respondents were ranked under each Basic Area and analyzed in terms of frequency and consistency. The statistical patterns revealed the scope and character of problems which were common to most youth in junior and/or senior high school. These common problems provided the focal points of adolescent concerns in twelve areas of living. The writer believes that the procedure of building problem areas from the ground up results in ones which have a substantial basis in the lives of young people. The problem areas listed on the following pages illustrate this process.

SUGGESTED PROBLEM AREAS APPROPRIATE FOR GENERAL EDUCATION

IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

The common and persistent problems of adolescents cluster in the problem areas described below.

1. SELF-UNDERSTANDING. The focal points of adolescent concerns in this area are: (a) achieving a sense of responsibility, (b) accepting the obligations and privileges of adulthood, (c) understanding the forces which mold personality, (d) developing desirable characteristics of maturity, (e) understanding the relationship of self to peers and adults, (f) developing a wide range of interests, (g) achieving a sense of personal satisfaction in leisure activities, (h) learning to select worthwhile leisure interests, (i) learning to make wise decisions, (j) developing personal value and standards of conduct, (k) achieving self-respect and a sense of personal worth, (l) gaining a sense of security in meeting new situations.
2. Healthful Living. The focal points of adolescent concerns in this area are: (a) understanding and accepting bodily change, (b) learning to care for and improve personal appearance, (c) developing appropriate health and nutritional habits, (d) accepting physical handicaps in self and others, (e) recognizing the relationships between personal health and the health of others, (f) understanding the relationship of health to success in school, employment, and social life, (g) learning to deal with problems of mental health, (h) accepting a personal share in solving community health problems, (i) achieving a healthful balance between work and play, (j) learning to evaluate advertisements pertaining to health and personal appearance, (k) learning to seek reliable advice in health matters.
3. HOME AND FAMILY LIVING. The focal points of adolescent concerns in this area are: (a) recognizing and respecting the rights and privileges of family members, (b) cooperating in making family decisions, (c) recognizing the need for family recreation, (d) developing a more mature understanding of parental standards of conduct, (e) assuming a share in home responsibilities, (f) adjusting to family's financial resources, (g) developing a more independent status within the family, (h) respecting the values of family life, (i) experiencing security in one's family situation, (j) understanding the role of family life in our society, (k) learning to accept one's family in relation to the families of peers, (l) contributing actively toward strengthening the family unit, (m) recognizing the responsibilities of marriage and family life, (n) discovering the characteristics of personality which make for a happy marriage.
4. PERSONAL-SOCIAL RELATIONS. The focal points of adolescent concerns in this area are: (a) achieving satisfactory relationships with the opposite sex, (b) gaining understanding of the obligations of marriage, (c) learning to select a marriage partner, (d) choosing friends wisely, (e) understanding the significance of popularity,

(f) understanding and respecting adults, (g) maintaining standards in the face of group pressures, (h) recognizing the responsibilities and obligations of friendships, (i) learning the responsibilities of group participation, (j) achieving maturity in meeting interpersonal relationships, (k) maintaining individualism in a group-centered society, (l) understanding and accepting the personal strengths and weaknesses of others, (m) developing socially acceptable behavior, (n) understanding the pattern of relationships between adults and adolescents in our society, (o) meeting intergroup and intercultural situations with tact and tolerance.

5. EDUCATION AND SCHOOL LIVING. The focal points of adolescent concerns in this area are: (a) evaluating personal talents and abilities, (b) learning how to study, (c) selecting appropriate subjects, (d) adjusting to interpersonal relations with classmates and teachers, (e) developing a wholesome attitude toward success in school, (f) choosing school activities wisely, (g) recognizing the values of educational attainment, (h) preparing for the financial obligations of education, (i) planning for college, (j) planning for military service, (k) cooperating in community efforts to improving an intelligent opinion of what constitutes good education, (o) recognizing the basic premises separating various educational systems at home and abroad, (p) examining the responsibility of the school to alter its program in response to pressure groups.

6. VOCATIONAL PREPARATION. The focal points of adolescent concerns in this area are: (a) learning to evaluate personal talents and abilities, (b) investigating a wide variety of careers, (c) evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of preferred vocations, (d) determining the preparation required for a specific career or vocation, (e) experiencing a feeling of security in a vocational choice, (f) recognizing the responsibilities of employee and employer, (g) recognizing the real satisfactions of employment, (h) planning military service in relation to vocational preparation, (i) recognizing that there are no "soft" jobs, (j) considering the expense required to prepare for a preferred vocation, (k) evaluating parental and social demands for entering a particular vocation.

7. LIVING IN THE COMMUNITY.¹ The focal points of adolescent concerns in this area are: (a) finding appropriate teenage recreation, (b) taking an interested part in community projects (c) cooperating with adults in civic activities, (d) helping to create a good neighborhood, (e) recognizing the social forces shaping community life, (f) developing ways of preventing juvenile delinquency, (g) planning to meet the needs of growing communities, (h) understanding the political and financial responsibilities of community life, (i) understanding the obligations of a community to its citizens, (j) developing rapport between adults and adolescents in the community, (k) helping younger children develop their interests (e.g., assisting with Little League projects, etc.), (l) experiencing the satisfactions of being an active participant in the conduct of community life.

¹Recommended only for junior high school.

8. DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT. The focal points of adolescent concerns in this area are: (a) accepting the rights and obligations of a voter, (b) understanding the role of political parties in government, (c) understanding the structure and function of the several levels of government, (d) developing the desire to be well informed about governmental problems, (e) accepting the responsibility to support, and at the same time, work for the refinement of a democratic way of life, (f) recognizing the expanding role of government in our lives, (g) recognizing the existence of inequalities and injustices in governmental activities, (h) evaluating the propaganda of political parties, and pressure groups, (i) discovering the theoretical bases of competing forms of government.
9. ECONOMIC UNDERSTANDING. The focal points of adolescent concerns in this area are: (a) finding appropriate ways of earning money now, (b) considering the economic status of a preferred vocation, (c) learning to handle money wisely (e.g., saving, budgeting, and investing money), (d) making wise consumer judgments, (e) learning to live within family economic resources, (f) evaluating the various kinds of advertisements, (g) gaining experience in making economic decisions (e.g., buying and selling, investing, credit buying, evaluating various employment benefits, etc.), (h) accepting one's financial obligations to all levels of government, (i) gaining a sense of the real value of money, (j) understanding the function of supply and demand and the consumer's role in determining price, (k) providing economic security for the future, (l) understanding economic cycles, (m) recognizing and guarding against bad business practices, (n) discovering how labor and management solve their economic problems.
10. RELATIONSHIPS WITH MINORITY GROUPS. The focal points of adolescent concerns in this area are: (a) dealing intelligently with problems of integration and segregation, (b) recognizing scientific research about the bases of race and racial characteristics, (c) gaining insight into the origins and functions of prejudices, (d) handling intergroup relationships with tolerance and respect, (e) depending on intelligence rather than force in solving minority problems, (f) discovering the bases for differing beliefs and customs, (g) recognizing the inequalities faced by those of certain races and religions, (h) respecting the contributions of minority groups to our culture, (i) recognizing that each person has an individual contribution to make toward the solution of tensions in this area.
11. INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING. The focal points of adolescent concerns in this area are: (a) recognizing the factors influencing differing cultural patterns, (b) finding ways to gain a personal knowledge of various cultures, (c) analyzing the bases of conflicting ideologies, (d) exploring the ways for settling disputes peacefully, (e) recognizing basic conflicts among nations, (f) finding common ground for building a lasting peace, (g) cooperating in the

peaceful exploration of space, (h) utilizing science and technology for the benefit of all men, (i) learning to evaluate propaganda, (j) respecting varying cultural patterns, (k) understanding the beliefs and customs of other lands.

12. FINDING VALUES BY WHICH TO LIVE.¹ The focal points of adolescent concerns in this area are: (a) understanding the origins of our beliefs, (b) making wise value decisions, (c) understanding and respecting the beliefs of other people, races, religions, and cultures, (d) recognizing the development of the values of a democratic society, (e) understanding the need for a continuous examination of values, (f) building a consistent and functional pattern of personal values, (g) learning to deal intelligently with value conflicts, (h) understanding the function of values in directing behavior.

The most promising curricular organization for utilizing the problem-area structure is, in the writer's judgment, the preplanned adolescent-problems core curriculum.

Evaluation of the procedure

As an instrument for determining the immediate problems of youth, the Science Research Associates Youth Inventory did not reveal a sufficiently wide range of common problems to warrant its exclusive use. The problem survey given students broadened the range of problems considerably by revealing those which adolescents recognized they should face and attempt to solve. Particularly at the junior high-school level, however, many problems identified by adult groups were not recognized by youth. If general education is to extend the social skills and competencies of all youth, they alone cannot be responsible for identifying their problems.

The semi-structured questionnaires enabled adults to identify a wide range of problems they believed youth face and should face. The relationships among problems identified by all groups pointed toward those which were common and persistent in the lives of most youth. The five social scientists involved in this study, reinforced the judgment of other groups. Further experimentation is needed to warrant an evaluation of their contribution. To participate effectively, however, social scientists should have a direct knowledge and/or experience with adolescents of secondary-school age.

The procedures developed in this study yielded problem areas differing somewhat in emphasis and scope from those reported in current use. Problem areas dealing with conservation of natural resources, communications, my state, and like are commonly found in the structure of general-education programs. The writer's research yielded no evidence that these represented concerns of a majority of youth in the participating schools. The problem area of leisure-time activities, appearing frequently in current use, became part of several problem areas in this study.

¹Recommended only for senior high school.

Social change often results in a shift in emphasis within a problem area. This study revealed that minority problems were of sufficient concern to warrant formulation of a specific problem area. This change illustrates the value of the problem-area structure for creating general-education programs with the flexibility required by modern times. Although broad areas of living in our society are relatively stable, realignment of the scope of a problem area may be expected to result when continuous study and observation at the local level are the bases for curriculum change.

Conclusions and Summary

The major conclusions from this phase of the study are:

1. Youth themselves and adults sensitive to adolescent problems are capable of identifying problems of concern to a majority of adolescents in a particular locality.
2. A sampling of student and adult opinion is sufficient to formulate an initial problem-area locality.
3. Identification of both the immediate and wider social aspects of problems is necessary to yield problem areas appropriate to the functions of general education.
4. The free-response questionnaire technique reveals a wide range of problems which may be common for all or most youth.
5. The Basic Areas of Responsibilities and Relationships in Adolescent Development provide a suitable structure for questionnaires, for interpreting data about adolescent problems, and for the formulation of problem areas.
6. Continuous local study and revision of problem areas are necessary if they are to represent the problems impinging upon the maturing adolescent.

Since the development of problem areas should be the result of local research, those presented in this study are not necessarily appropriate for all secondary schools. They illustrate, however, how this structure is formulated from a problem-area study. The procedures used in this study are suggested as a valid approach for teachers and administrators to use in undertaking curriculum reorganization in the area of general education.