

The School's Job with the Disaffected

THE aim of education in a democracy is to give everyone an opportunity to learn under conditions that are motivating and challenging. We must not, however, overwhelm the individual with demands he cannot meet.

Traditionally our education system has had three principal objectives: First, since we are a nation ruled by the people, ignorance and blinding prejudices threaten the survival of democracy and individual liberty. A literate reasoning citizenry is imperative. Second, Americans have always felt that we owed each individual an opportunity to realize his intellectual potential, to become a constructive happy person in his station in life. We have felt that one's station in life should be determined primarily by his ability and motivational drive rather than by the accident of birth. Third, in the economic field, education has been a major avenue for upgrading both the individual and the society. Education has enabled individuals to get better jobs, and it has enabled our society to become highly developed technologically. Our people have developed the high level of skills and understandings necessary for a complex industrialized society.

These educational objectives must be reached with the vast majority of our pupils or our society cannot progress, and in fact may decline or die. It is for this reason that all society must be con-

cerned with reaching the disaffected. If we miss the mark with a few students, society will survive, but many thoughtful Americans are fearful that the number of disaffected students in our schools today is dangerously high, and that there will continue to be less and less room for the disaffected on the fringes of society.

Probably no one can say with certainty just how many disaffected children and youth are presently inmates in our elementary and secondary schools. Twenty-five percent of the school population would, I believe, be a conservative estimate. In some rundown urban neighborhoods, the disaffected youngsters probably constitute a majority.

In the early adolescent years, disaffected children usually show their lack of identity with society by becoming underachievers in school. They become "sitters" or "psychological drop-outs."

While the law requires that they be physically present, they do not participate in the social or academic life of the school. They lack a sense of identity with their teachers, with a majority of their classmates, and with the school as an institution.

Religious and character building groups do not reach the disaffected either. In our study, only 14 percent of those youths who subsequently began college were unknown to any minister,

priest, or rabbi in the community, while 64 percent of the dropouts were unknown.

When disaffected children or youth leave school, great numbers of them find themselves unemployable and their anti-social tendencies, already strong, become even stronger. When disturbed adolescents find that they are on the economic and social scrap heap, their hostility toward society increases to dangerous proportions. Conant has labeled these youngsters, "social dynamite."

Disaffected youth are unemployed for both personal and societal reasons. Factory foremen and top sergeants are looking for most of the same qualities that teachers found lacking in disaffected youth, and neither factory nor army has much patience with an individual with a "chip on his shoulder" or an inability to read and reason.

Unskilled labor used to find employment on farms and in the mines. Today, however, these industries require more skill and far fewer men than they did ten or twenty years ago. The number of semiskilled and unskilled factory workers has remained constant in recent years, and the proportion of such workers has declined. On the other hand, the demand for highly educated personnel has increased rapidly, and this trend will continue.

Throughout the 1950s we have seen a larger and larger proportion of unskilled and semiskilled labor become unemployed, and unemployed for longer and longer periods of time. With the rise of women in the labor force and with the automation of business and industry, we are beginning to realize that many of our chronically unemployed are really unemployable and will remain so unless they are extensively rehabilitated. Only the well educated, flexible individual is as-

sured of long term economic security in modern society.

Democracy without a sense of responsibility is dangerous; it can easily lead to legal control of the government by the "shirtless ones" or some other totalitarian mass movement. Persons who do not feel that they have a stake in their community or nation are usually willing to sacrifice their freedom to a party or leader who promises them revenge and/or security. Perón, Hitler, and many of the other dictators took over because their societies contained large masses of disaffected individuals who felt that they had nothing to lose. In the early years of our own great depression large numbers of usually stable Americans became somewhat disaffected and both communism and fascism reared their heads in America. When individuals feel that they are a part of a society and have a stake in it, they may still want to modify it, but in an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary manner.

Let us now turn to the school system itself. What stake does education have in reducing the numbers of disaffected? Education is dependent upon the public for both moral and financial support. When today's disaffected youth become parents they are not likely to back the teacher in his attempt to inculcate a love of learning in the next generation.

In our study of an age group, *Growing Up in River City*,¹ when we compared the dropouts with children who stayed in school, holding constant intelligence and socioeconomic status, we found that the parents' attitude toward education and the school made a vital difference

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¹ Robert J. Havighurst, Paul H. Bowman, Gordon P. Liddle, Charles V. Matthews, and James V. Pierce. *Growing Up in River City*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1962.

tendency of overemphasizing vocational, nonacademic education for these children.

5. It will provide an exciting challenge for teachers if they realize that they need not simply aim to "bring these children up to grade level," but rather can actually develop new kinds of creativity.

6. It will make the school more pluralistic and democratic because different cultures and styles will exist and interact side by side. Thus, each can learn from the other and the idea that the teacher has much to learn from deprived children will take on real meaning. Genuine cultural interaction between equal cultures can become the hallmark of the school.

7. It will enable the teacher to see that when visual aids or techniques such as role-playing are used, it is because these devices or techniques are useful for eliciting the special cognitive style and creative potential of these children.

8. It will lead to real appreciation of slowness, one-track learning, and physical learning as potential strengths which require careful nurturing.

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—FRANK RIESSMAN, *Mobilization for Youth and the Department of Psychiatry, Columbia University, New York, New York*.

Editorial

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in whether or not a child dropped out of school. The parents' attitude in turn was heavily influenced by their own experience in school.

Education must constantly go to the public for funds. The voters will support the school adequately only if they remember school as an institution interested in their welfare and that of their children. Where education has been an escalator to success, as it has to most suburbanites, teachers are making a good living. However, where many of the parents feel antipathy toward the schools, the status of teachers in the community and at the bank is low. Our pupils and their parents set our salaries, and our humanity and our competencies in large measure determine their support.

In summary, we must better serve disadvantaged children because we owe every child the opportunity to become a productive happy person, united with his fellow citizens by a feeling of identity. If we fail in this quest with large numbers of youth, we seriously endanger not only the mental health of our students, but also the economic life of the nation, and democracy itself.

—GORDON P. LIDDLE, *Associate Professor of Human Development, University of Chicago, Illinois*.

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