

Curriculum Developments

Column Editor: Melvin W. Barnes

Troubled Times for Students

ONE of *Time* magazine's education writers speaks as follows of what he calls the "sheepskin squeeze":

Once upon a time, the children said good night to their parents and went to bed; nowadays, often enough, the parents may say good night to the children and go to bed, leaving the young scholars to finish their endless homework some time before dawn. If the American student could be fitted out with a pressure gauge, the needle would be trembling at a high figure.

During the past year one high school faculty has been making a study of the feelings of the students they teach. This exploration grew out of an interest in what they called the "underdeveloped capacity to learn" that certain students exhibited. To get the facts for the faculty, several specialists were added to the school staff. A committee of teachers and administrators, working on released time for the project, provided leadership. The faculty is presently studying the findings and formulating plans for their use.

Following is a report of some of the feelings of a selected sample of 150 students in this high school who were given opportunities to talk about the pressures they felt. In one phase of the study these students were interviewed by a psychologist. To achieve rapport, the psychologist worked regularly in the school. Each student was interviewed at least three

times in order to get a close approximation of his true view of his place in school, his achievement, social status, his way of looking at teachers, the ways teachers look at him, his grades, friends, and friendship groups. The data yielded by the study are yet to undergo complete analysis, but the more obvious trends of response are clear.

Grades. These students saw getting grades as the order of the day. More than anything else, grades stand out as the end-all and be-all of education. A sizeable percentage of students are aiming for minimum grades, good enough at least to keep them out of trouble. Others are hard at it trying to protect a good record. Typical of the comments the students made are these:

"Everybody works for grades."

"I don't care how much I learn as long as I get a respectable grade."

"Grades are the important thing because they get you into college."

"You get a bad grade and your parents bawl you out."

"No one would do anything at all if we didn't have grades."

For these students, being a good or an acceptable learner, keeping up one's grades, and meeting expectations are the dominant feature of the academic side of school life.

The importance of school. School work may be a bitter pill, but apparently it is good for you. The students seldom doubted the value of staying in school. If one has no hope of college, he still needs a diploma to get a job. The argument that an education is useful carries conviction with the students. They say:

"It's important to work in school if you are ever going to do anything."

"School is something you get through so you can get a job someday."

"You have to get through school some way."

"School will help you later on."

It appears that the "stay-in-school" campaigns as well as what adults tell them, have impressed students with the idea that it is necessary for one at least to complete high school, and to go further if he can.

Teachers. Few students said it was pos-

sible to get much satisfaction from study. Generally speaking, they work for such purposes as to be like their peers, to get a diploma, to go to college, to satisfy the demands of adults, and to get a job. They feel they participate only in limited ways in deciding what to learn and how to learn. Teachers are largely managing the learning process for them. Students are doing what the teacher requires and not much more. Each clears his mortgage with the school and calls it square. Typical comments are these:

"Half the battle is in knowing what to expect from teachers."

"Teachers put pressure on you. Lunch time lets you relax."

"You have to get along with teachers no matter how difficult they are."

"School is boring except once in a while when teachers set up something different."

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"Teachers should make you learn. Only hard things are worth doing, so schools should be hard."

"There are days when school gets to be a real drag. You want to get through so you can do something interesting."

As students usually do, these youngsters said they liked teachers who show an interest in them, have a sense of humor, explain things well, and have a capacity to feel what students feel. They disliked teachers who talk too much, who will not repeat an explanation, or who simply assign work for others to do. They experience a lost feeling when they do not understand or cannot find out how to go about doing a task. This was prominently mentioned as a source of anxiety.

Social status. As a source of worry and concern, social status assumed great importance. The school as an adolescent subsociety is, of course, no new subject of study. Some years ago, Carson McGuire, for one, studied "role assignments" in a school society and found that students placed one another in well defined status relationships known to themselves as "wheels," "outcasts," "drips," and so on, with varying degrees of peer status attaching to each category.

The students of the present study readily identified and classified several social groups in their school. Members of the "high" group are the "soce" kids. Those in the "low" group are "hoods." A middle group occupies a rung on the social ladder between the "hoods" and the "soces." On the outer fringe are the "greasers" who "aren't really a part of school." Social connections are extremely important. "It's better to walk down the hall with a drippy girl and act bored with her than walk down the hall alone." The "high" group "runs school politics and acts as if the school were run for them."

What manner of institution ought to

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day's high school to be? How can a school reach the student who is just sitting it out, wistfully waiting for a future that somehow promises to be better than what is here and now? With mounting standards, rising stress on intellectual content, and sharpening competition, unquestionably we are adding to the number who show the symptoms of tension. There are, of course, some signs of increasing concern for the dropout and the anxiety-ridden.

We are asking some good questions about the psychological sources of academic and disciplinary problems. Hopefully, we are on the road to a fuller acceptance of the task not only of ministering to the students' mental health but also of exploring the effects of unreasonable expectations and prolonged states of sustained fright.

—MELVIN W. BARNES, *Superintendent of Schools, Portland, Oregon.*

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