

Needed Research on Characteristics of Today's Youth

Robert S. Fleming

JUDGE Kohler has indicated that "we are wasting a million kids a year." There are numerous illustrations of young people who are victims of lack of success, unemployment, illness, leaving school early and other evidences of frustration, lack of purpose and unhappiness. This is shown in Heyman's fascinating book *Willie* (4). The world of Willie is but "four years old and two blocks long."

President Kennedy's message to Congress relative to mental illness and mental retardation (2) placed emphasis on the "critical size and tragic impact" of the nation's most urgent health needs. He proposed new resources to stimulate action to prevent, treat and rehabilitate patients. He placed major emphasis on research to seek out the causes of mental illness and retardation and eradicate them.

Documents coming to our attention these days bring staggering statistics concerning youth. According to the 1960 White House Conference, we are told that the leading causes of death for the teen-agers include suicide, homicide and accidents. Interesting facts are being uncovered about those who commit suicide: they are usually intelligent, they are nonparticipants in school affairs, they fail to identify with adults. We are also told that in general one out of fifteen young people will spend some time in

a mental institution. We know that more teen-agers are admitted to mental hospitals than are members of any other age group.

The United States Department of Labor continues to focus on youth as it studies unemployment. The Department estimates that about 20 percent of the unemployed are youth. Also, it is estimated that about two thirds of the youth, ages 16 to 21, who are out of school, are unemployed.

In one city of one hundred thousand the Juvenile Aid Bureau reported over two thousand investigations in one year with 425 children appearing in Juvenile Court. Seventy-two of these children were sent to state correctional institutions, and there are over three hundred children on probation. It was also found that 4.4 percent of the births were out-of-wedlock. Almost half of these children were born to girls age 13 to 19. Doubtless these facts are not too different from many other communities of similar size over the country.

Extensive emphasis on dropout studies continues to help us characterize the dropout as a ninth or tenth grade boy, somewhat retarded, capable of achieving, with no zeal or real interest in the particular school as it exists for him.

The California State Department of Education reported in 1961 that the emotionally handicapped child may be

described as one whose behavior over a period of time shows that he has one or more of these disabilities:

1. Inability to learn, which cannot be solely explained by intellectual deficit, sensory or general health factors or by social or ethnic differences.

2. Inability to work or play or make friends with children or adults.

3. Inability to act his age; inappropriate type of behavior.

4. General pervasive mood of unhappiness, inability to regard oneself as good, likeable, or worthy of attention or love.

5. Inability to deal with stressful situations in school without becoming ill, having headaches or stomach-aches, or developing speech difficulties. (1)

Statements concerning mental retardation, mental illness, suicide, accidents, illegitimacy, unemployment, are symptomatic of the problems of youth. They reflect complex social problems, they pose mammoth concerns and require new insight, new patience, new interest, new skill. They require a new commitment to research and to the use of research findings in our schools.

As one views the multiple problems affecting youth, he turns at once to research to produce some new knowledge, new techniques, new solutions. Perhaps at best we must look to research for new insights and new approaches.

We look to research because of a deep sense of caring, a deep concern that we not earmark, characterize, or stereotype our current crop of young people. We look to research because of our concern that we not force young people into a model which we conceive but which may not be accurate. There are no easy answers. Out of deep and subtle social problems come unrest and the urge to express one's self. This is true of various social class groups. We must have insight and knowledge which enable us to guide

not retard, to stimulate not control, to lead not dictate. If our young people are to achieve their potential, they must be helped to feel good, to be optimistic, to be enthusiastic, to be successful. What do we need to know about their characteristics and attitudes?

Needed Research

We need new data about today's youth. Major studies with large numbers in various socioeconomic areas are to be encouraged. Extensive work is needed by an interdisciplinary approach to get at the many forces affecting the well-being of young people. These studies should not be limited to school or school associated situations. Data collected need to be analyzed, compared, grouped and studied for significant trends. Doubtless this should be done by national groups with exceedingly competent resources.

We likewise need again to encourage local groups of teachers to study particular groups of children and youth under their supervision. Too little is known in most schools about the young people in attendance. The urgency at the moment appears to be to encourage teachers, guidance workers and school faculties to undertake multiple studies of young people themselves before we do too much generalizing about them with inadequate evidence. Perhaps as teachers begin to identify differences they will value, rather than to try to obliterate differences. According to Weiss (6) we need experiments which are done for a purpose—a purpose other than just to do research. If our focus is on helping youth then we seem to need information in terms of the questions:

1. *Who are they?* Gross inventories and studies of young people in a school

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are needed to understand better who they are. This includes names, background, ethnic group, mobility, where they live, occupation of parents, students' knowledge about their community. Also case studies of classes might be undertaken as well as summaries of information about an individual.

2. *What are they like?* Extensive work is essential in this area. Comprehensive surveys of physical characteristics are needed. This includes gross qualities of weight, height, nutrition, defects. Inventories and surveys of health factors often reveal major barriers to school success. Studies of emotional needs and personality factors have long been a valuable source of knowledge about young people. Surveys of unfulfilled needs, surveys of major behavior problems help identify a group. Questionnaires and inventories of interests have important contributions to make. Extensive analysis of work habits can for some hold a key to improved work in school. A study of students' values from their writings and discussions has generated many new understandings of ways of beginning to identify with groups and individuals.

3. *What are their past experiences?* Interviews, discussions, inquiries about work experience, travel, observations, reading and school records have great value in sizing up characteristics of a group. Such is essential in planning programs and experiences which are balanced and which increase the holding power of the school.

4. *How do they spend "out of school" time?* As we are able to survey ways young people spend their "free" time, we have another index to their characteristics. Such inquiries must be made for special groups since there are doubtless marked differences in communities.

in boys and girls, and in socioeconomic factors.

5. *How do they feel about school?* Feelings, beliefs, attitudes are difficult to assess. Yet we need data on relationships of youth with teachers, authority, parents. We also need new insights concerning students' attitudes toward work, participation, achievement and things in general. Such data help us to measure growth and to increase our effectiveness in improving the learning process.

6. *What can they do?* Let us not underestimate what our youth can do. We need data concerning their independent work, creative abilities, skill in various academic fields. We need new knowledge about their understandings of sex, health, marriage, work, government, democracy.

7. *What are their plans, purposes, aspirations?* To be sure, they have dreams and aspirations. What are these? How realistic are they? Are their plans comprehensive? What is the relationship of purpose to ideas and people? What are their perceptions as to blocks to their realization of their purposes?

8. *What does youth have to say?* Reference is made to Mallery, *High School Students Speak Out* (5). We must design research techniques which capture and inform us as educators and adults as to what our young people have to say. What about the future? What do they have to say about today's world? How do they see our current problems of integration, venereal disease, lung cancer, dropouts, unemployment? We must not become indifferent to their point of view. Many of our current educational problems could likely be solved if we were to increase our sensitivity to what young people have to say and to their feelings and values.

Such information as may be secured from the preceding questions, then, can be focused on another level of problems. Illustrative of these are ways of increasing the holding power of the school, ways of removing blocks to learning, ways of relating school to the total well-being of youth, ways of adapting the school to basic value patterns, and ways of developing more effective educational materials.

Too often we operate as if we are sure that we know. Too often our knowledge reflects research of former years and of other social class groups. Perhaps a valuable research requirement has to do with selecting key studies of the past and repeating them today. Likewise we need to make new application of data in terms of today's needs. It could be that we operate on a premise that is worn out, unrealistic or even incorrect.

One of the most available sources of information about the youth of a given community should be the school. School records should be comprehensive, current, accurate and should hold the key to detailed information about characteristics and attitudes of individuals. Perhaps a major research need is to intensify the job of improving school records to the end that they will more fully serve their proper purpose.

Diversity of Research Procedures

One way to encourage greater effectiveness of research concerning today's youth is to focus our procedures more sharply. It is strongly suggested that diversity of techniques be devised for acquiring data needed (3). By and large we have often depended upon a few research instruments or techniques. It is believed that the following procedures are germane for the task required:

1. *Procedures which encourage youth to express themselves orally.*

2. *Procedures which encourage young people to write their feelings and to express what they are thinking.*

3. *Procedures which sharpen and improve observations by teachers and other professional workers.*

4. *Procedures which give specific responses to problem situations are useful.*

5. *Procedures which focus on the young person and his relationships with his friends.*

6. *Procedures which highlight the individual as a member of a family unit can provide helpful information.*

7. *Procedures which attempt to get at information, skill, choices, vocabulary, knowledge and understandings are of great value.*

8. *Procedures which portray over a period of time, work and progress.*

This listing of procedures is merely suggestive of the great need for researchers to use a variety of tools. To learn more about today's youth we must listen more. To learn more about today's young people we as adults must find ways of relating, working, playing and associating with these young people. To learn more we must find ways of using various disciplines and agencies which have contributions to make. Many are now aware of the role of the medical worker, the psychologist, the social worker in team approaches to helping students. Perhaps we need the assistance of many others, including vocational workers and other persons who are closely associated with young people.

An assumption is made that to help young people we must know them. The aura of research can help as we use our best knowledge, as we test our assump-

tions, as we seek new data and as we coordinate and synthesize our findings.

There are likely thousands of young people whose limited world may be described or measured in terms of city blocks, spelling lists, or meaningless bodies of content. The real person has feelings, aspirations and values which can make or break future generations.

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—ROBERT S. FLEMING, *Assistant Commissioner of Education, State Department of Education, Trenton, New Jersey.*

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cally examining the schools without investigating other institutions for correcting excesses and imbalances that exist in the social and economic order. In appraisal, the culture has largely overlooked the family, church and community. The culture must avoid expectations from the child disproportionate to other age groups. Society should provide continuous education by all agencies for youth and adult so that gains of civilization will be shared with the entire human race.

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