

## Dropouts and the School

WHEN a youngster elects to quit school before formal completion, he is in effect removing himself from a potential lifetime income officially estimated at \$165,000 for the high school graduate. A 16- or 17-year-old youngster simply may not comprehend the enormity of such a decision, or he may not possess the maturity of judgment to understand fully his own life situation, enabling him to arrive at such a decision intelligently. Such a youngster needs intensive guidance and counseling. The dropout may be a person with serious personality and environmental conflicts rather than an immature person who simply decides to walk away from his responsibilities.

We live in a fast-tempo, ever-changing, ever-demanding society characterized by a high success-value orientation. With this in mind, educators must not simply write off as failures the young people who follow sudden whims to "go it alone" in a job market, which, unknown to them, is rapidly closing its doors to individuals like themselves. Such youngsters need adult attention,

understanding, sympathy and expert guidance that enable them to appreciate fully the serious consequences of their "decision" which, in all probability, guarantees them permanent retirement from work, before they even begin.

Even a cursory review of the statistics bears this out: The unemployment rate among dropouts is double that of the general population; they are also out of work for longer periods; dropouts are identified as that hard core of uneducated young people who perform the most menial and routine work tasks.

Taking this further, in terms of upward strivings, some writers have suggested that social mobility is becoming less and less possible in America. When one considers the growing unemployment rate, especially among youthful workers, in the ranks of a diminishing unskilled labor class, it almost suggests that as class affiliation goes, we are probably witnessing the emergence of an "economically disaffiliated class" in the economic structure of a super-scientific America.

Reversing this possibility must begin in adequate school programs. Such programs incorporate the best that we know in educational principles and practices, including experimentally tested concepts

---

*Thomas L. Millard is Lecturer in Anthropology and Sociology, Upsala College, East Orange, New Jersey; and is Visiting Instructor in Sociology, New York City Community College, Brooklyn, New York.*

and procedures in learning, resulting from present-day technological requirements and social demands found in an automated society.

### A Challenge to the Schools

To be sure, there is no easy solution toward arresting these statistics. However, enough is known about the social, emotional and educational syndrome for dropouts and the myriad problems facing the dropout to permit parents, employment counselors, social agencies, business and industry and, more especially, the public schools to do something meaningful and lasting about the situation.

But present-day school programs dealing with the dropout crises are, but for a few exceptions, grossly unrealistic, inadequate, unimaginative and unsympathetic.<sup>1</sup> Too often, interested and willing teachers are frustrated by indifferent school administrators, jerry-built curricula that favor the "middle class child" and a superfluity of hurried and aimless "crash programs" that collide with each other with incredible clumsiness. One example: The nationwide campaign in the summer of 1963 to induce dropouts to return to school, which to date has met with indifferent success.

An alarming percentage of those who came back are dropping out again—and rightly so—for what else was there to expect, reexposing them to the same learning situation and frustration which caused the initial withdrawal.

The concern is that this is taking place within the school. Historically, the school has been the major social institution capable of influencing the child.

<sup>1</sup> For a capsule review of some of the projects now being conducted in various school districts, see Monica Bayley, "A Renewed Effort to Solve the Problem of Dropouts," *School Life*, Vol. 46, No. 3; December 1963. p. 11-16.

As an agent representative of the larger, more comprehensive and more complex organization we call "society," the school fittingly may provide that specialized assistance and all that socializes the individual into a useful and productive citizen.

Education is one of the two major influences in the life-preparatory experience of the child in terms of meaningful training for lifetime labor productivity. Thus, education can be an effective agency in developing the child's life goals and adequacy in meeting the labor requirements of an expanding, technological society.

Even such eminent investigators as Jersild,<sup>2</sup> Sullivan,<sup>3</sup> and Warner<sup>4</sup> view the school as second only to the home in its influence to shape the self-concept and self-esteem of the child. Yet in dealing with the dropout problem, it is a waste of time to point our fingers toward the home. The modern nuclear-age home simply does not have the preventive or "holding power" in regard to dropouts. If one must look for an institution that is big enough, with power and resources, the public schools are the answer. Within this framework, the central problem for public education is one of developing an imaginative and far-reaching curriculum with bold new concepts in teaching and with new techniques and devices for the prevention and/or holding of dropouts. Such an instructional program promises the highest potential for modifying the reactions of those students who find school

<sup>2</sup> Arthur T. Jersild. *In Search of Self*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1952.

<sup>3</sup> Harry Stack Sullivan. *Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1953.

<sup>4</sup> W. Lloyd Warner, Robert J. Havighurst and Martin B. Loeb. *Who Shall Be Educated?* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944.

an unrelated life experience in terms of the meaning which they invest in school.

For the almost one million youths who yearly quit the classroom, leaving school is nearly always a symptom indicative of overwhelming academic and social frustrations. To a great extent, they see themselves as "misfits" in the currently prescribed curricula in social and life-preparatory experiences. They mask their feelings of insecurity, inadequacy and loneliness by withdrawing from basic social learning.<sup>5</sup> That there is a significant relationship between the way a person views himself and the way he looks upon others has been shown by Berger,<sup>6</sup> Sheerer,<sup>7</sup> and Raskin.<sup>8</sup>

Thus there appears to be general agreement that how a child views himself is his most important belief. This is actually the psychic foundation for his very being. Snygg and Combs<sup>9</sup> suggest that the child not only values his self identity, but that he will engage in certain activities designed to protect and/or enhance it. Thus, the person derives meaning from his social situation only as he brings meaning to it.

<sup>5</sup> The reader's attention is directed to *School Failures and Dropouts*, a new Public Affairs pamphlet in which Edith G. Neisser summarizes what is known about the course and treatment of this serious personal and social problem. Also see Edgar Friedenburg, "An Ideology of School Withdrawal," a chapter in the NEA publication, *School Dropouts*, Daniel Schreiber, editor, 1963.

<sup>6</sup> E. M. Berger. "The Relation Between Expressed Acceptance of Self and Expressed Acceptance of Others." *Journal of Abnormal Social Psychology* 47:778-82; 1953.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth T. Sheerer. "An Analysis of the Relationship Between Acceptance of Self and Acceptance and Respect for Others in Ten Counseling Cases." *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 13:169-75; 1949.

<sup>8</sup> Nathaniel Raskin. "An Analysis of Six Parallel Studies of the Therapeutic Process." *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 13:206-20; 1949.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Snygg and Arthur W. Combs. *Individualized Behavior*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949.

This, in effect, means that the individual comes into a social situation prepared to learn certain things and also ready to resist or ignore those social situations which seem unrelated to his needs. Each individual has formulated these goals from his own unique life experience, no matter how enriched or deficient this may be.

In terms of the learning situation, Robert Bills<sup>10</sup> suggests that learning is a self-actualizing process and that the self-concept of the child influences his ability to function effectively.

### Education Must Commit Itself

Study of the available data suggests we will not be able to eliminate the dropout problem at any time in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, some inroads on the problem are possible, though only when public education realizes the commitment it must make and is aware of its own cumulative impact potential.

The focal point of any commitment must insure for the individual maximum learning opportunity to grasp the interlocking nature of social institutions that comprise our social and economic system,<sup>11</sup> to understand the emerging requirements for economic participation and to think in a more meaningful way

<sup>10</sup> Robert Bills. "Believing and Behaving: Perception and Learning." *Learning More About Learning*. Washington, D. C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1959, p. 55-73.

<sup>11</sup> This is a vital point, for the school is the only tax-supported institution devoted exclusively to the training of the young. Commenting on American education, Hofstadter suggests that our society has been "passionately intent upon education" but the results of our educational system have been "a constant disappointment." For more on this, see Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963.

about his productive talents and their ultimate contribution to the economic system. Above and beyond this, what we really need is a sweeping and exacting program of self-criticism and analysis that will enable us to understand the "whole person" in the total context of his sociocultural life; but to date, no one has thought through just how this ought to be done. Apparently this is only a sociologist's pipe dream, for there is little evidence such a possibility is forthcoming to deal with the dropout problem.

Lacking this approach, the sociopathological conditions that spawn dropouts will continue to be a blight upon a nation whose chief characteristic is human betterment and social improvement. It is precisely this aspect of an affluent society, the impossibility of achieving material well-being and adequate comfort, that is proving to be a cultural eyesore in an age of plenty and in a still expanding economy.

The need for such a program is clear enough, but the lack of interest is at least matched by the widespread and glaring deficiencies in imagination concerning it. This much, however, is true: It will only be through the long-term labor of genuine collective action of school, community and social agency, with the resourceful help of government and industry, that the roots of the dropout problem will be unearthed and the disease destroyed.

### The Negro Dropout Problem

The dropout problem is particularly severe among Negro youngsters, who comprise a large percentage of today's unemployed youths. Negro youths, even when they are high school graduates, may experience even greater frustration

in job finding than do their white contemporaries. In 1962, for example, about one out of every four Negro youngsters in the labor force was out of work, compared with about one out of every eight white youngsters. Since 1955, the jobless rate among Negro youngsters, according to official reports, has risen faster than among white boys and girls—up about 60 percent among Negroes compared with 30 percent among whites.<sup>12</sup>

From the Negro point of view, the greatest domestic challenge facing American society is making manifest and real equal opportunity for all so that we may live constructively and independently in modern society. As the Educational Policies Commission has pointed out:<sup>13</sup> "If the problems of the disadvantaged are to be solved, the society as a whole must give evidence of its undifferentiated respect for all persons."

### Understanding the Dropout

A random sampling of the life histories of most dropouts would seem to suggest the etiology of the dropout syndrome as falling into two groups: (a) those syndromes which develop slowly out of social and academic failures on the part of the individual to incorporate in his life-scheme orientation those attitudes and values which are in harmony with the larger society, and (b) those syndromes which develop relatively rapidly, due to sudden deleterious influences in the person's social or academic milieu, precipitated either by the socio-physical difficulties of mar-

*(Continued on page 261)*

<sup>12</sup> *Welfare in Review*, 1963, Vol. 1, No. 4. Washington, D. C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> *Education and the Disadvantaged American*. Washington, D. C.: Educational Policies Commission, NEA, 1962.

our cooperation too high. How often we must have failed to give the gift of appreciation. But he never said so and he might deny it if he were here now. He seemed to see only the good in us. And that made us better people.

We'll miss Andy. Something goes out of a person's life with Andy gone.

—WILLIAM VAN TIL, *Professor of Education and Chairman, Department of Secondary Education, New York University.*

#### Dropouts—Millard

*(Continued from page 250)*

ginal living or the inadequacy of mutually reinforcing social interaction.

The influence on human personality of these social and psychological agents lies in the fact that it stirs up easily aroused feelings of envy towards the self-adjusted, goal-directed school child, contempt for the adult figure and distrust and/or perhaps hostility toward everyone in comfortable identity with the cultural values and their expectant goals.

In consequence, all the satisfaction and experiential background which the school experience can offer the individual meets with only limited success and subsequent failure as the individual becomes more or less socially and emotionally isolated from the mainstream of socialization.

To the disinterested, unattached school child (as with most dropouts) the school experience becomes an abstraction in which he plays an uncreative role in the discovery of ideas and meaning (whatever they are). While he does not know it, his unresponsiveness or anti-learning behavior, is, in part, external dramatization of powerful instinctual urges, unhampered by self-regulating experiences.

Obviously, it is the school's responsibility to ascertain the cause or causes for the child's unproductivity and, once the reason is found, the school program must be adjusted to meet the child's needs, or the child must be helped to adjust to the program. This must bring into play the full resources of the school—the psychologist, vocational counselor, the classroom teacher, the guidance personnel, the psychiatrist and the social worker in one collective and concerted act.

To find the root cause for disinterest in learning is a critical point, for learning to find satisfaction and pleasure in the immediate personal-social situation of school is the basis of the maintenance of educational interest.

In terms of the individual's need to acquire an understanding of the harmony and workings of his social environment and its varied parts, one looks to education, for it is education that bestows comprehension.

This must lead us to a searching reappraisal of previously defined educational goals, of methods and content and of our present ability to impart the message to children in the earliest grades.

Only so can they understand that school is the place where they belong and that taking advantage of its preparatory experiences is prerequisite for any meaningful relationship in an automated, nuclear society which calls for abilities of the mind as contrasted with previous needs of brute strength.

Seldom, if ever, has education been the instigator of important social change. It has, in fact, reflected more closely the basic social, political and economic changes going on around it and, in this sense, it lends itself beautifully to the requirements of pedagogical change.

Copyright © 1965 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.