

# Excerpt from Adolescence to Adulthood\*

Jerald G. Bachman, Patrick M. O'Malley, and Jerome Johnston

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*The authors followed a representative national sample of over 2,000 young men through high school and for five years beyond. They were particularly interested in the causes and consequences of the level of education the young men attained, so they looked at differences between students who dropped out of high school and those who did not, and between those who went on to college and those who did not. This excerpt from Volume VI of the Youth in Transition series presents a number of their recommendations for education.*

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One of our fondest hopes in launching the Youth in Transition project was that we would uncover educational practices in some schools and/or some programs which were clearly above average and which could be recommended for the improvement of other schools. Such policy implications were not forthcoming from the research. Instead, we found that different students attend different schools, and seek and attain different amounts and different kinds of education. Nevertheless, such findings do have policy implications, albeit more complicated and perhaps less satisfying than those we sought.

*Ending the Anti-Dropout Campaign.* As noted earlier, a special focus of the Youth in Transition project has been to distinguish between the causes and consequences of dropping out of high school. Volume III in this series was devoted largely to the basic question, Does drop-

ping out really change anything? That volume, based on data extending to one year after most graduated from high school, concluded that "... dropping out does not change things a great deal—at least not in ways that are apparent by the time a young man reaches the age of nineteen or twenty" (p. 175). Now, based on longitudinal research extending four years further, the impression of rather little change as a result of dropping out can be extended at least to age 23 or 24.

The self-esteem of dropouts was slightly lower than that of high school graduates in 1974, but it had been lower in 1966 as well. This finding belies expectations that dropouts must surely suffer increasing losses in self-esteem as a result of their public failure to complete high school.

\* *Adolescence to Adulthood—Change and Stability in the Lives of Young Men.* Ann Arbor, Michigan: Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan, 1978. 351 pp.

Instead, their self-esteem increased considerably from 1966 to 1974, at just about the same rate as shown by the graduates. The occupational aspirations of dropouts were also a bit lower than graduates in 1974, but the differences had been greater in 1966. Delinquency also showed a pattern of relatively stable differences between groups; dropouts were higher in 1974, but the differences were actually less than in 1966. Along all of the dimensions mentioned above, dropping out appeared to have had rather little effect. Another set of dimensions, occupational attitudes, did show some small changes in relationship, however. For example, the dropouts became relatively more concerned about having a good paying job. But this is by no means a negative effect of dropping out; it probably realistically reflects the dropout's more precarious position in the labor market. We conclude that there are very few negative effects of dropping out other than the previously discussed, and very important, risk of unemployment. To the extent that dropouts are disadvantaged, the dropping out is largely a symptom, not the cause, of their problems.

What implications derive from this conclusion? Certainly one implication is that exhorting potential dropouts to stay in school in order to get a *better* job is likely to be misleading. Five years after graduation, those who ended their education with a high school diploma did not have noticeably better jobs than dropouts in terms of status, pay, and job satisfaction. They did have better chances of avoiding unemployment. Another implication is that the majority of high school dropouts are probably no better or worse as employees than are those whose education stopped with a high school diploma. If they were, presumably there would be discernible differences in status and wages. But if most dropouts are just as good employees as high school graduates, then why do dropouts have the much higher unemployment rate? There are two possible alternatives.

1. Some dropouts simply lack the abilities and/or motivation to work. The same qualities which led them not to finish high school lead them to fail to find or keep jobs.

2. Jobs are harder to find for dropouts. Since the credential of a high school diploma is a re-

quirement for many jobs which dropouts could perfectly well perform, this alternative is a very likely possibility.

Both alternatives are probably true to some extent. Surely some dropouts are misfits; they were unable to fit well into educational institutions and they do not fit well into occupational institutions either. But many others need not be considered misfits. Whatever the reasons that the educational environment did not provide a congenial fit, it does not follow that dropouts in general could not fit into an occupational environment. Indeed, our data indicate that many dropouts do find the occupational environment to their liking.

We believe that dropouts are often victims of discrimination in the job market. Some employers who require a diploma for jobs are discriminating on the basis of a credential which may not be truly indicative of the applicant's potential as an employee. Of course, some proportion of dropouts who are really misfits may be screened out effectively by the requirement of a diploma, but we would argue that the costs are too great.

Forcing every young person to stay in school through twelfth grade in order to help in screening for employment is not an efficient screening mechanism for the society as a whole. For one thing, the sheer cost of educating everyone for twelve years, when ten years might suffice very nicely for many, is extravagant. For another, by keeping in school individuals who basically do not fit in well with educational institutions, we needlessly make life much more difficult for everyone else in the school. Both teachers and serious, willing students suffer from the enforced presence of individuals who have little or no positive incentive to be in school, and the experience of staying in school is considerably unpleasant for the potential dropouts who react to an environment they dislike by doing little but wasting time and causing problems for others. The views expressed in Volume III seem equally applicable now, based on our follow-up data five years after high school graduation:

. . . The campaign against dropping out seems based on the assumption that everyone needs at least twelve years of formal education. But the research reported here has led us to question that assumption.

We have found that some young men can manage reasonably well on the basis of ten or eleven years of education. Perhaps others would do so if they were not branded as "dropouts."

Certainly there are alternatives to a twelve-year diploma; perhaps one based on ten years would be sufficient. Young people wishing to enter college might spend the years equivalent to grades eleven and twelve in publicly-supported college preparatory academies. Others might enter one-year or two-year vocational training or work-study programs. . . . Still other young people might choose to go directly into the world of work after their tenth-grade graduation—some to return to part-time or full-time education after a year or two or three.

In a world of rapidly changing technology with its emphasis on continuing education and periodic re-training, there is less and less reason to maintain the traditionally sharp boundary between the role of student and the later role of worker. Shortening the prescribed minimum period for full-time uninterrupted schooling might be a positive step toward new patterns of lifetime education in which individuals can choose for themselves among a wide range of "educational life-styles." If such changes would reduce the credential value attached to high school diplomas, all the better. One of the unfortunate side effects of the anti-dropout campaign has been the tendency to confuse education with credentials; any step in the opposite direction could have a salutary effect on our whole educational establishment (pp. 181-82).

#### *Moving to Alternative Forms of Credentials.*

More and more in recent years the credential value of education seems to have taken precedence over the supposed socialization value. The phenomenon is not limited to the campaign to persuade would-be high school dropouts to "hang in there and get that diploma." At the other end of the educational continuum, the Ph.D. is seen as a "union card" not just for academic jobs but for many other jobs outside of academia. It can be argued that this growing emphasis on schools as sources of credentials more than socialization has impaired their effectiveness in both respects. Historically, credential value may have become attached to education largely because education really did signify socialization. But given that correlation, the conclusion was drawn that if individuals wanted to "do better" they should get more education. Then increasing emphasis was placed on the degree, the credential, rather than on the content of the educational experience.

If the above speculations are sound, one could argue that among the implications of urging the young to gain better educational credentials

have been: 1. an increase in the number, and proportion, of individuals who reach each level of educational attainment; 2. some reduction in the quality of ability, knowledge, and performance represented by each such level; and 3. a decrease in the relative payoff value of each educational level and credential. In other words, educational credentials are a currency subject to a lot of inflation. There seems to be a growing awareness of this inflation and a new caution about the payoff value of education. If the credential value of education is reduced—eroded by the new caution about educational payoffs and/or replaced (at least partially) by alternative forms of credentials—one of the most desirable side effects may be that educational institutions can focus greater attention on the socializing functions for which they were designed.

We think that some shifting away from grades, years of schooling, and diplomas as credentials would have a positive effect on both students and schools. One potential advantage of reducing the "credentialing" function of the schools is that it would reduce an unfortunate kind of adversary relationship between students and teachers. Under present conditions the quest for grades has a game-like quality. Some teachers, in an attempt to be fair, take great pains to explain the "rules of the game" so that students who are motivated to get good grades will know how to do so. But even under those conditions a student sometimes feels the need to try to persuade the teacher to award a higher grade, make some special allowance, etc., so that the student can gain the credential perceived as necessary to make it to the next step on the educational ladder. Some teachers who "grade on the curve" turn grading into a zero-sum game; the rules of this game are such that one student's gain must be at the expense of another student—hardly a situation to promote cooperation and helping among students.

Of course there also are instances when the need to achieve a certain level of performance on some assignment or test proves to be a (mostly) constructive motivating force. We think it is possible to reduce the emphasis on classroom grades and still make use of the positive motivation to do well on tests and assignments. Moreover, we think that the motivation to acquire credentials

can be harnessed more constructively if the credentials are seen as sensible and functional.

In this regard we view the current interest and experimentation in competency testing as a healthy step. System-wide, or even state-wide, tests for specific skills and competencies can dramatically change the old adversary relationship between student and teacher. The teacher becomes a helper and guide for the student trying to become well prepared for the examination. The student provides much of the task-motivation rather than relying on the teacher to do so. At least in those subject areas for which it is appropriate, competency testing could lead to reduced emphasis on classroom grades—perhaps even their elimination.

What about other areas of schooling that are not readily adapted to competency testing? We would agree that art appreciation, music history, and a variety of other culturally enriching courses in high school and college are less appropriate for competency testing. But, by the same token, we think they are also inappropriate as bases for credentials in the job market. Thus, we believe that an across-the-board deemphasis on classroom grades coupled with the selective use of competency testing would result in better credentials and, as a side effect, much better working relationships for both students and teachers.

*Less Time, More Options.* That phrase is the title of a special report and recommendation published by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education in 1971. The Commission proposals included: a reduction in length of time spent in undergraduate college education; a reduced emphasis on certification through formal higher education; more mixing of work and study throughout a lifetime; a wider range of options that would include alternatives to deferring college, "stopping out" for a while to gain experience and changing directions. The Commission concluded that if these and other recommended reforms were accomplished, then "Formal education would absorb less of the time of students and less of the resources of society, and it would, at the same time, serve better both the interests of the students and the needs of society. We need more paths and more rates of progress to individual self-fulfillment and to service to society" (1971, pp. 31-32).

Many of the Commission's recommendations need not be limited to education at the post-high school level. Indeed our own suggestions offered in Volume III and quoted earlier in this chapter call for similar changes at the high school level. More recently, a similar perspective was reflected in *Youth: Transition to Adulthood*, a report issued in 1974 by the Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee, chaired by James Coleman. The panel stressed the needs of young people to take on more real responsibilities, to interact with people across a broader range of ages and circumstances, and to expand their work-role experiences. The panel reached the conclusion that the best way to meet such needs was to *decrease* the time that young people spend in formal educational settings. The panel recommendations included a variety of ways in which school and work could be alternated, including half-time schooling coupled with half-time employment. This work-study pattern is not new, of course, but the panel recommended that it be pursued by a large proportion of high school students, not just those who need to learn a skill because they are not headed for college. A related recommendation is that school personnel also act as "agents of the young," and seek out opportunities for work-role experience in the larger community. Again, this is not a totally new idea, but the panel proposed that it be carried out on a much larger scale, that it include government support for the costs incurred by the "host" organizations in the community, and that it be coupled with a reduction of time spent in traditional classroom settings.

The recommendation that young people spend less time in formal school settings should not be taken as a criticism of schools. Rather, it is a reaction against requiring too much of the schools. This point was made clearly by the Panel on Youth:

Schools are the principal formal institutions of society intended to bring youth into adulthood. But schools' structures are designed wholly for self-development, particularly the acquisition of cognitive skills and of knowledge. At their best, schools equip students with cognitive and noncognitive skills relevant to their occupational futures, with knowledge of some portion of civilization's cultural heritage, and with the taste for acquiring more such skills and knowledge. They do not provide extensive opportunity for man-

aging one's affairs, they seldom encourage intense concentration on a single activity, and they are inappropriate settings for nearly all objectives involving responsibilities that affect others. Insofar as these other objectives are important for the transition to adulthood, and we believe they are, schools act to retard youth in this transition, by monopolizing their time for the narrow objectives that schools have (Coleman *et al.*, 1974, p. 146).

The changes proposed by the Panel on Youth ". . . are intended to break that monopoly, through environments that complement schools." Thus the proposals ". . . address the objectives that schools omit, by proposing institutional structures that aid these objectives" (Coleman *et al.*, 1974, p. 146).

Our present findings may be seen as consistent with these views expressed by the Panel on Youth. It seems that recently too much has been expected of formal schooling, and too much has been claimed for it. Schools may not be very likely to produce the broad socializing effects that have sometimes been claimed. Rather than assuming or demanding such effects, and then viewing the lack of such effects as evidence of school failure, perhaps we should develop a reduced and more realistic set of expectations for

schools. Students, educators, and the rest of society could all be the beneficiaries.

### References

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Jerald G. Bachman (left), Patrick M. O'Malley (center), and Jerome Johnston are all Research Scientists, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

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The *Youth in Transition* series reports results of a longitudinal study of a nationwide sample of 2,213 boys who entered high school in the fall of 1966. A battery of tests was administered, and repeated interviews and/or questionnaires were collected during the eight years thereafter. The fifth and last measurement on 1,628 young men still participating in the study was obtained five years beyond high school in the spring of 1974. Three categories of findings were obtained: (a) individual differences; (b) changes in mean scores; and (c) causal connections.

### Findings

In general, the findings on individual differences revealed that variations among the boys in

background and ability were related to differences in their academic attainment, and differences in academic attainment were in turn related to their later occupational status. In other words, those who came into high school with advantages were very likely to hold those advantages at least five years beyond high school.

The differences were quite stable; the more you had, the more you got. For example, on the average, boys from higher socioeconomic backgrounds had higher ability, got better grades in the ninth grade, had higher aspirations, showed higher job ambition in tenth grade, were subsequently more likely to attain higher levels of education and higher job status when they went to work, and had higher levels of self-esteem. Those at the low end of the socioeconomic distri-

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