



High School Graduates of the Stormy 1960s: What Happened to Them?*

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Most students who participated in protests in the 1960s were not political activists—but they really did dislike school.

During the 1950s, high school students were noted for their apathy. Ten years later, teachers and administrators were trying to cope with student activism and demonstrations. Most of the demonstrations in secondary schools occurred between 1965-1970. In that period, 56 percent of the junior high schools and 59 percent of the high schools experienced some form of student unrest (Stoops, 1969).

During 1976-1977, we surveyed 628 young men and women who had graduated in 1970 from high schools in the Cleveland, St. Louis, Los Angeles, and Edmonton, Canada, areas. These

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graduates, who had been in secondary schools during the hottest period of student unrest, were asked to respond to questions regarding their protest activities during high school and their present political/social activities and concerns.

The "Average"

The largest group of students—those we will call the "average"—viewed high school in a lackluster way. For the most part, they were "the embodiment of tradition, philistinism, and middle-class preoccupation with property, dating, and boosterism" (Wilson, 1969). One young woman noted, "I don't remember much about high school. It was there. I had some friends I enjoyed being around, but nothing much ever excited me." Politically, they provided no leadership. One student explained his involvement in a demonstration this way: "Protest was vogue. The media played it up. It was the 'in' thing. I don't think most students really were committed to much of anything. Students in the colleges were running around raising hell . . . So what else was there to do?"

Members of the "majority" uniformly criticized "favoritism" that was afforded selected students. The favored social group was thought to be composed of students who were student council members, cheerleaders, outstanding athletes, wealthy youth, and the honor society initiates. "Average" students believed the "in" students were not expected to follow the same regulations. As adults, the "average" still consider themselves largely excluded from influence. They limit their involvement to social and civic groups; they believe society is controlled by elites.

The "Cruisers"

A small group of students viewed school as a center for social activities; they can be described as "cruisers" or "surfers." One student commented, "We went to school to make love, not grades. When the surf was up, we cut out. No one really seemed to care. We were too busy to get into the protest movement. Life was now . . . and it was to be enjoyed."

The "Grinds"

Another small group of students could be re-

ferred to as the "grinds." They were intellectually motivated and concerned about getting into a prestigious university. "With the experts of the world waiting expectantly for glorious achievements, how could [they] possibly disappoint them? [They] struggled forward, searching in vain for a fate that might be worthy . . ." (Medred and Wallechinsky, 1976).

As adults, some of the "grinds" have continued to isolate themselves in academic pursuits. Others have expanded their interests to include political activities and concern for issues such as offshore oil spills and malnourished children. Both "surfers" and "grinds" remember high school as "all right," neither particularly stimulating intellectually for those with academic interests nor particularly relevant for those who preferred to cruise and enjoy parties.

The "Protesters"

The most publicized but least numerous group were those who protested. These students felt that life in school and the "real world" were tangibly and radically at odds. A poem by Shei, a fifteen-year-old girl, illustrates the incongruity:

At school we discussed the products of Italy and Japan
How well the olives grow on the slopes of
the Mediterranean.
Then our teacher talked about her trip
To France,
Showed us some of her snaps with the Eiffel Tower
in the background
And one of her
Walking along the Cote d'Azur near Monte Carlo
She passed around her souvenirs—
A set of beads, a tiny crucifix, a post card of the Pope
Blessing some deer in a shaded park.
Later, Mr. Mundon discussed the moon . . .
We drew pictures of a rocket.
At home I watched the news with Walter Cronkite
And the gentle face of a boy
Bathed in burning Napalm
Oh Christ . . .
Oh Jesus Christ . . .
Amen.

For the protesters, the school was an extension of political and social control. "We were told what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. We had little choice if we wished to remain in school. Some of us opted out of the fish bowl . . ." Their political activities were high, protesting food serv-

ices in the cafeteria, teacher dismissals, curricular changes, war, integration, and so on. They participated in community rallies, and their school absences were frequent. Today, they continue to be politically active by voting, working for candidates, and supporting issues not unlike those they supported in high school.

Common Criticisms

All groups of students voiced similar criticisms of the schools. First, they considered schools as a place to act and conform. They believed out-of-school activities were more influential than in-school activities in their becoming mature and responsible citizens. Second, they criticized the curriculum. It was considered irrelevant and uninteresting, not related to social concerns. Additions to the curriculum, such as "black studies," were viewed as fringe offerings and labeled "non-academic." A third criticism related to the rarity of choice making. They felt that the number of choices available to students was directly related to their social status. "Upper class" students could leave classes to participate in activities, had greater access to courses, and received more laudatory comments from teachers and administrators. A fourth criticism concerned the insensitivity of teachers and administrators toward students. With few exceptions, students felt teachers did not know them beyond the classroom, and thought their in-class attitudes toward students were tainted by the effects of teacher lounge rumors.

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Generally, the respondents did not enjoy high school. They enjoyed their friends and some of the activities, but not school itself. Some respondents told of extreme unhappiness. One said, "I am a bitter person, mostly because of the crap I went through in high school. Competition in [this] school system stinks and I really never wanted any part of it, nor do I now. I hated every minute of high school. I must have thought about suicide 1,000 times while I was in it." Another mentioned that the best part of the day was working after school and on weekends, and commented on the boring classes he had to take.

Protests

About 20 percent of the respondents indicated they were active in demonstrations and radical activities. The majority demonstrated against school authority and rules; 12 percent said peer pressure caused them to participate.

They gave several reasons for participating. A young woman who is now a lawyer said, "The whole protest movement seemed to blow in like the weather, and it changed as quickly as it came."

Other reasons included the "incongruities of life being taught." Most respondents saw little relationship between the curriculum of the school and what they saw in the real world.

Conservative or Liberal?

Although about a third of the students felt they were liberal while in high school, about half of the respondents consider themselves liberal now.

Conservative students felt student union affairs and school regulations were more important issues than liberal students believed them to be. As one student who had been an activist said, "Through experience I find that the educational system is a game. The rules are set up by the top administrators, and one has to play the game in their way or be punished. The educational system needs changing to provide for more humanistic attitudes so that our future generations will not only be taught technical skills, but skills of wisdom, in order to put knowledge to use for the betterment of mankind." Differences in student status were also noted in this comment, "Students

from higher income families appear to be more cruel, more rude, and less sensitive than middle- and lower-class students. This was true when I was in school and seems to be still true."

At the present time, most respondents felt they were more liberal now than when they were in high school. Liberal students are more active in community affairs than nonliberal students. Liberals aspire more frequently than nonliberals to be school teachers and other similar professionals. About 80 percent of the male respondents took additional training after high school graduation; the majority of the respondents are currently employed at about the teacher or nurse level position.

Summary

Based on our findings, it would seem that activists:

1. Tend to be presently more politically active;
2. Agree more with educators than the general public on the importance of emphasizing basic skills, career development, moral education, and teacher inservice; and
3. Value independence and personal motivation more than nonactivists.

Schools have changed; the changes reflect concerns of the students of the 1960s. Parental involvement is being encouraged, and in most schools dress codes and hair styles are no longer an issue. Once ignored, students' rights have been guaranteed by the courts. Due process for search procedures, suspensions, and discipline actions are required; all children are guaranteed the right to an education.

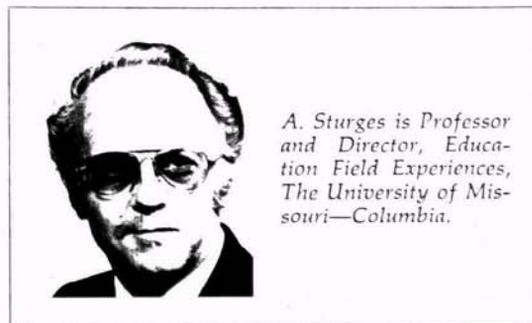
There have been a number of curriculum changes also. In 1975, DeArmon reported that over half of the schools in his study had adopted action or community learning programs, and half had adopted career education programs. Instructional programs in independent study and individualized instruction had been adopted by over half the schools. And more than 75 percent of these curricular, organizational, or instructional changes had been implemented since 1970.

It seems that student unrest of the late 1960s involved a minority of students who were the

precursors of social and cultural changes in the United States and Canada, and that their concerns are reflected to a degree in current social programs. Current criticisms of the public schools, however, can be related to some of the concerns expressed by students in the 1960s. Irrelevancy of content, inadequate mastery of basic skills, and inequality related to social or cultural differences are still problems of public education. There remains a group of students who are dissatisfied with schools, but who express their frustration in other ways. In the 1960s, students demonstrated to dramatize their frustrations; today's dissidents use absenteeism, vandalism, and violence.

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