

# The Growth of Adolescent Apathy

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Although the hallways and classrooms of our public schools look the same as they did a generation ago, the current inhabitants of the schools are significantly different in appearance and in attitude. Amidst the generally cheerful and interested students who greet today's teacher are more and more wan, bleary-eyed faces. These students, at least four or five in almost every high school class, often miss school, don't finish homework, and receive poor grades. Not only are they uncommitted to school work, but they participate in few school activities.

## Students Who Work

Several factors contribute to this adolescent apathy, the first being the enormous increase in the number of adolescents who have jobs. According to recent statistics, 42 percent of all high school sophomores are employed part time. The number of seniors who work has increased to three out of five, or 63

percent (Peng and others, 1981). Not only do more adolescents work, but they now work more hours. For example, 56 percent of male students with jobs worked more than 14 hours a week (Cole, 1980).

Although the benefits of adolescent employment have been widely touted (adult responsibility and increased communication skills, for example), the costs of working are less clearly explicated. Greenberger and Steinberg (1981), in their comprehensive study of youth employment, found that working leads to a decline in school performance and diminishes adolescent involvement in school. They also found that working



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## *Part-time employment, drug use, and remoteness of the political process make young people increasingly listless and cynical.*

contributes to a cynical attitude toward work, reduces the amount of time spent with families, and weakens teenagers' ties with their friends. In addition, they show that the use of cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana tends to increase with increasing hours of employment.

Even some of the beneficial aspects of working may have a deleterious effect on schools. Greenberger and Steinberg found that working promotes the acquisition of certain "practical" knowledge, which may make students somewhat less interested in the "abstract" subject matter presented in school. In fact, 51 percent of high school seniors agree that their jobs are more enjoyable than school (Peng and others, 1981).

### **Adolescent Drug Use**

A second factor that contributes to the malaise of today's youth is their increasing involvement with drugs. Over the past five years, drug use, once confined to specific and identifiable

groups in the school, has become more of a cross-clique phenomenon. Even social groups such as athletes, who formerly looked down on drug users, now incorporate drugs into their recreational activities. Recent statistics indicate that 67 percent of the graduating class of 1981 admitted to some illicit use of drugs (O'Malley, 1982).

Increased drug use contributes to adolescent apathy in both academic performance and in attitude. The more time adolescents spend under the influence of drugs, the less time they have to learn. A National Academy of Science publication (1981), for example, shows that while marijuana use does not result in permanent brain damage, it does inhibit short-term memory, decreases creativity, shortens attention span, and reduces energy and motivation. All of these factors, of course, harm the adolescent user's academic performance. And even students who cut back on drug use find themselves at a developmental level far below their peers and feel powerless to catch up.

Because drugs are illegal, they must often be used in secret, and repeated secretive behavior results in a decreased sense of school community among adolescents. With so much energy invested in drug-centered activities, students find school less appealing, and begin to regard school activities as silly or at least irrelevant (Brundage, 1982).

### **Apoliticism**

Clearly many teenagers, probably the majority, progress through adolescence unaffected by part-time employment and drug use. Even these well-adjusted students, however, may be influenced by a third aspect of adolescent apathy—apoliticism.

This disposition in adolescents involves, among other things, a narrowed vision of the American dream, a profound disinterest in and distrust of all forms of political activity, and a parochial attitude toward the world beyond the adolescent horizon. Ten classes of 12th grade students from an affluent school, when asked if they thought that "politics is very boring," agreed two to one (Mackey, 1982).

This factor in adolescent apathy involves feelings of powerlessness and the general futility of political action. According to a study of 4,500 adolescents, these feelings appear to be growing more rapidly among females from affluent suburban communities (Mackey, 1982). Furthermore, apoliticism, futility, and cynicism lead to disinterest in other areas of adolescent life, including social activities.

### **What Can Be Done?**

*Student employment.* Regarding employment, parents and teachers need to reconcile themselves to the fact that adolescents are likely to be more attached to their jobs than to school, and it may be beyond the adults' power to do much about it. Adolescent interest in earning money may be part of the rampant consumerism that has characterized America since World War II. During this period, as adolescents acquired more money, they became potential customers, and advertisers focused their campaigns on them. Heavy spending by adolescents on clothes, records, and entertainment followed. Today, most ado-



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lescents feel that they must acquire as many possessions as their peers, forcing them into the workplace.

School officials should take the initiative in providing data about adolescent work to students and parents. If, for example, working more than 14 hours per week contributes significantly to a decline in school performance (Cole, 1980), then the parents should be told. We do not advocate scare tactics, only that reliable information on all consequences of adolescent employment be available.

As work becomes more pervasive in adolescent society, it should also be incorporated into the school curriculum. No longer can study of the world of work be left exclusively to Junior Achievement and clubs peripheral to the school. In language arts, students can write resumes and letters of application. Social studies classes should analyze job trends and the sociology of work.

*Drug use.* Strategies for attacking student drug abuse are more problematic. Responding to the increase of student drug use by employing a chemical dependency counselor, as many schools have done, can isolate the problem from classroom teachers. In order for a school to deal effectively with drug abuse, all school personnel—teachers, administrators, counselors, school nurses—must work together to develop shared norms with consistent consequences that are brought to bear every time a drug problem occurs.

Specifically, teachers can deal with the use of drugs in several ways. First, they should make students accountable for staying straight in school by making a statement to that effect as part of their classroom expectations. Second, they must abandon the "I'm here to teach biology and student drug use is not my problem" ideology. The drug problem is shared by all who work with adolescents. Third, they must become aware of the symptoms and causes of drug use. Fourth, teachers need to learn how to refer students with drug problems to sources of assistance in a positive and appropriate manner. Finally, teachers must accept the sad fact that the only thing we teach students who are high during school is that they can get away with being high in school.

These strategies should be worked out in inservice programs directed toward the drug climate of the school. Rules regarding drugs need to be made clear to all students so there is no ambiguity. And students should be involved in the decision-making process whenever possible.

In their eagerness to eliminate drug problems, however, school officials must not attempt to cure students of adolescence itself, with its emphasis on the peer group, experimentation, and imitation of adults. Nor should teachers ignore the pain that may be at the root of drug use, whether it comes from "the pressure to achieve amidst doubts about one's abilities, the family one is born into, or the wounds one's self-image suffers as a result of others' casual thoughtlessness, or an alienating school structure" (Brundage, 1982).

*Apoliticism.* Adolescents have become apolitical because the political process is remote to them. This distance can be reduced by studying political phenomena that adolescents experience. For example, students might examine the school as a political system.

This kind of analysis is not a new idea. In 1938, Howard Wilson urged that teachers be trained "to keener perceptions of the social processes within the school" and that they use the knowledge they gather to stimulate classroom discussions. Wilson claimed that students will discover in the small world of the school many of the social processes and forces that dominate society.

Systematically scrutinizing the school as a political system will introduce students to the dynamics of political analysis. Ultimately, this kind of study can bridge the students' understanding of the political system of the school and the American polity.

Twenty years ago in a study that included subjects from the United States, England, Germany, Italy, and Mexico, Almond and Verba (1963) found that adults who remembered participating in civics classrooms were more politically competent than those who did not. This finding suggests that participation in political discussions and activities in school help foster a sense of responsible citizenship.

In the two decades since that study, we have learned a great deal more about effective civics instruction.

Researchers have found, for example, that much of the political information presented in government courses is redundant. The same content has already been presented to pupils in previous courses (Langton and Jennings, 1968). Participation in school governance and a more open school climate produce positive political attitudes and behavior in pupils (Ehman, 1980), but the effect of innovative instructional materials is blunted if the school climate is inappropriately closed (Biber and Minuchin, 1970). Nevertheless, schools "emphasize strict obedience to rules as opposed to participation in making rules and inquiry into the need for the purpose of rules" (Patrick, 1977, p. 205). The result is that political knowledge, attitudes, and participation have declined in the last decade (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1978).

This research implies adolescents should study politics in an environment that models a democratic political orientation. They need to become aware of the political possibilities in their daily routines, learn techniques to examine their difficulties, and be encouraged to participate in political action within their schools. Government classes should have an appropriate curriculum, a climate that encourages student participation, and a class constitution.

For example, at Humboldt Junior High in St. Paul, Minnesota, pupils learn about politics by organizing their civics classes into a legislative body. In this semester-long experience, pupils submit both mundane and important issues to the vote and learn to live with the consequences of their legislation. One day, pupils in one class decided it was acceptable to eat in the classroom, but sunflower seeds and soda were forbidden, and if there were serious violations or excessive mess, the teacher was given the right to suspend all eating for two days. Out of such seemingly trivial political activity, a sense of political efficacy can be born.

Today's adolescents find themselves confronted with a society that is seemingly frenetic, unduly materialistic, and somewhat disenchanting with its government. Miraculously, perhaps, most teenagers manage to escape unscathed from the turbulence of adolescence. Others, who have not developed the coping skills necessary to deal with adult challenges, feel confused and perhaps a

bit frightened. It is no wonder they pull away from society by retreating into part-time jobs, anesthetizing themselves with drugs, and refusing to participate in the political system.

Although the increase in adolescent apathy is cause for concern, the situation is not hopeless. Instead of helplessly watching these students float farther and farther away, educators have a responsibility to try to pull them back into the mainstream of school life. □

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