

ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH - SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR
AND THE SCHOOL ATMOSPHERE

by

KATHLEEN J. BIEGE

B. Ed., Washburn University, 1971

-

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree


MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1975

Approved by:


Major Professor

LD
2667
R4
1975
E54
C.2
Document

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. INTRODUCTION	1
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	3
DEFINITION OF TERMS	3
DELIMITATIONS	4
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	4
DIRECTION OF THE REPORT	5
2. RESEARCH DATA	7
POTENTIAL INFLUENCE	7
JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AND SCHOOL DROP-OUTS	9
Evidence	9
Considerations for Prevention.....	11
DRUG ABUSE	15
Evidence	15
Considerations for Prevention	17
SUICIDE	19
Evidence	19
Considerations for Prevention.....	20
STUDENTS SPEAK OUT	22
3. SUMMARY.....	28
DISCUSSION AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS.....	30
CONCLUSIONS.....	37
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	40

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

As one of the world's richest, most developed and powerful nations we claim to be a society devoted to its young. We boast of free public education, Head Start programs for the disadvantaged, special education programs, and yet the number of American adolescents with emotional and mental problems continues to grow. (17:1).

The 1930 White House Conference on Child Health and Protection (17:5) estimated there were, at that time, at least 2,500,000 children with well-marked behavioral difficulties, including the more serious mental and nervous disorders.

The National Institute of Mental Health (17:5) estimates that 1,400,000 children under the age of 18 needed psychiatric care in 1966. The Clinical Committee of the Joint Commission on Mental Health of Children (17:6) reports the admission of teenagers to the state hospitals has risen 150 percent in the last decade.

The schools of our nation have taken on the great responsibility of the education of its youth; however, developing intellectual and vocational skills should not be their only concern. Considering the vast part of a child's life that is spent in school, it is easy to see the

potential influence the school has upon the child's total development. School, with its structure for learning and its housing of the peer group, is second only to the family as an avenue through which the adolescent's search for identity occurs. (18:264).

Today this identity search has become an even greater task than in the past. Thornburg (21:3) points out that today's adolescents are no different from those of past generations: the differences lie within our society. Sources agree that today's adolescents are under more of a strain and experience more stress than past generations because of vast technology, rapid social change, affluence, unrest and violence. Thus the generation gap caused by a changing society is widened; adolescents become confused and react by showing dissatisfaction with the adult culture, some may alienate themselves, others may become activists in their attempt to strike out at the establishment. This type of behavior, in some degrees, is common to the normal or average adolescent. Josselyn (17:372) states:

There is no symptom of the disturbed adolescent that does not one way or another fit into the category of normal adolescence. It is the degree, the crippling, and the unchangeableness of the symptoms that should be the criteria for evaluating whether the individual's behavior is that of a normal adolescent or an indicator that something, at least potentially, is going awry. (17:372).

As previously indicated, many adolescents go through this period of their lives experiencing only the normal

growing pains, others however, encounter problems and conflicts that for one reason or another they are unable to cope with. Unfortunately, some schools today may not be doing much to contribute to the mental upset of the adolescent student. It is this point, the influence of the school atmosphere on adolescent mental health, that is the concern of this report.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study was undertaken to examine the influence of the school atmosphere on adolescent mental health in relation to self-destructive behavior. More specifically, the purposes of this study were: 1) to stress that the school should not be solely responsible for prevention of self-destructive behavior, but that the school atmosphere does have a potential influence on sound mental health development of adolescents; 2) to present evidence that the schools may be contributing to the occurrence of adolescent self-destructive behavior; and 3) to offer suggestions for creating a school atmosphere conducive to sound mental health and the prevention of adolescent self-destructive behavior.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Adolescence

For the purpose of this report, the term adolescence

is defined in a social-psychological sense referring to the undefined period during which a growing person, in search of a new identity, makes the transition between childhood and adulthood.

Self-Destructive Behavior

Any behavior that is performed as the result of emotional or mental stress that has detrimental affects, mentally, physically or socially, on the well being of the individual involved. Those self-destructive behavior forms considered here are school drop-outs, juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, and suicide.

DELIMITATIONS

The scope of this study was restricted to an investigation of the influence of the school atmosphere on adolescent mental health in relation to self-destructive behavior. An investigation of the entire scope of adolescent mental health was neither implied nor intended. A further delimitation was made in considering only those self-destructive behavior forms known as school drop-outs, juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, and suicide.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study should enable administrators and teachers to understand the impact they have on adolescent mental

health and what they can do to help prevent adolescent self-destructive behavior. It is hoped that through this report the role of the school in preventing self-destructive behavior will be brought to light and that educators will accept this challenge with a deeper self-confidence and concern for the adolescent student.

DIRECTION OF THE REPORT

The material in the second chapter of this study was presented in a manner giving emphasis to the influence of the school atmosphere on adolescent mental health in relation to self-destructive behavior. A discussion of the potential school influence on sound adolescent mental health was presented as the first part of the research data. The reasoning for this was to stress that sole responsibility for development of sound mental health in adolescents should not be placed on the school, but that it should be a concern of top priority.

Each form of self-destructive behavior was presented separately in an effort to clearly illustrate the relationship between that type of behavior and the school's influence. A presentation of the evidence that schools may be contributing to the occurrence of adolescent self-destructive behavior was presented in order to illustrate that although most schools are concerned with the mental health of students, they may in reality be influencing self-destructive

behavior. Suggestions for school prevention of adolescent self-destructive behavior were given in conclusion to each behavior form discussed in order to contribute to a more organized format of reference. Student feelings were presented as the last part of the investigation to further emphasize the significant influence of the school atmosphere on adolescent mental health and to summarize the general feelings of all sources cited. The final chapter includes a section of summary and discussion, and a final section presenting the conclusions of the study.

Chapter 2

RESEARCH DATA

The material presented here on adolescent self-destructive behavioral forms is not an attempt to relate in depth each form of behavior, but to: 1) point out the potential influence of the school atmosphere on sound mental health; 2) to present evidence of how the schools may be contributing to adolescent self-destructive behavior; and 3) most important, considerations for school action that may help prevent such behavior. In some cases considerations will be given to specific groups that make up the total school system, and others will be made regarding the school as a whole.

POTENTIAL INFLUENCE

Adolescence is an ambivalent period full of stresses and strains. On the one hand the child looks back to the securities of earlier childhood. On the other hand, he reaches for the maturity of adulthood. The search for self begun in early childhood reaches a climax in the identity crisis of the teen years. The profound body changes associated with sexual development cause changes in body image and resulting tensions in maturing boys and girls.

Individual variance is great in response to these tensions, depending upon the resources that have been provided for them in their earlier developmental years. In American society, adolescent children continue to have problems in a rigid school system which is insensitive to their needs. A school atmosphere that is conscious of these individual variances can act as a positive influence in helping the adolescent adjust to the tension and stress associated with the identity crisis. (24:399).

The following thoughts of The Joint Commission on Mental Health of Children (18:128) summarize most effectively the potential influence of the school on mental health:

One outcome of the advances made in our knowledge of human behavior has been our awareness of the inextricable interaction between cognitive and affective realms of human functioning. In school terms, this means it is no longer feasible to separate the growth of cognitive functions, the use of the symbol systems, reasoning, judging and problem solving, acquiring and ordering information; from the growth of other developmental processes, such as self-feeling and identity, potential for relating to people, and autonomy and creativity, commonly regarded as personality development. These are interdependent developmental processes, all relevant to the broad concept of mental health. The classroom is just as much a psychological climate, which may be described in terms of expectations, sanctions, and codes for personal-social interchanges, as it is a medium for the specific tasks of learning, describable as to teaching methods, equipment and assessment. In terms of the investment of time and energy alone, school is a significant life environment for the child that will have a differential impact on his evolving self-esteem. In the middle years, it has special relevance with respect to trust in the world outside the family and on the psychological positioning of the self in the larger community. (18:128).

This is not to say that the school should be charged

with full responsibility of insuring proper adolescent mental growth, but to say that the school is one of the most important institutions influencing such development. The child or adolescent does not view school as a transitory period of his life, to him it is life. For the student much of what he knows of life and himself is bounded by the experiences of the school. If other segments of his life are not creating conflicts for him, the school has the opportunity to contribute greatly to helping the child reach his potential and to discover what he can be. If outside factors are creating conflicts for the adolescent, it is possible that positive school experiences will make coping with such problems easier. The critical point in making this possibility a reality lies in the atmosphere of the school.

JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AND SCHOOL DROP-OUTS

Evidence

For the purpose of this report, juvenile delinquency and school drop-outs will be discussed as they relate to and affect one another. Schreiber (20:30) supports this relationship in reporting that the rate of delinquency among drop-outs is at least ten times higher than that of students who remain in school through graduation. For adolescents from slum sections of large cities the incidence of these two situations is even greater (20:31). The

Joint Commission on Mental Health of Children (17:45)

relates that:

Too often the child of poverty becomes the 'functional illiterate' in our impoverished classrooms. By the time of his adolescence, school and home lose their influence; idleness and unemployment become a way of life. With so few opportunities open to these youths, unemployment is correlated with high rates of delinquency and anti-social activities. Arrest records almost assure continuing unemployment. (17:45).

Senna, Rathus and Siegel (19:481-94) in a study to investigate the relations between school performance and delinquency suggest that at least one contributor to delinquency is the negative interaction of certain youth with teachers and school officials.

Youth who have not acquired adequate socialization skills in the home environment, or who choose not to conform with the expectations that are a part of the academic setting, soon become labeled 'trouble-makers.' As a result of continued suspiciousness and negative attitudes of school personnel, they become gradually committed to the delinquent subculture and a vicious cycle begins. (18:482).

Cohen (2:482) found that adolescent boys from the lower class form gangs in order to deal with the frustration that results from their failure to gain status in the typically middle class American school. Hirschi (7:482) linked academic failure to rejection of authority and to the commission of delinquent acts. Toby (23:482) found that those who are academically successful are less likely to engage in delinquent behavior, suggesting that educational accomplishments might serve to reduce the incidence of delinquency. Goodman and others (5:177-8) in summary of

research on schools, vocations, and delinquency professed that:

... the school systems of Western societies presently provide poor apprenticeship in adulthood for many adolescents. A poor apprenticeship for being grown up is criminogenic. In this sense, the 'structure' of modern countries encourages delinquency, for that structure lacks institutional procedures for moving people smoothly from protected childhood to autonomous adulthood. During adolescence, many youths in affluent societies are neither well guided by their parents nor happily engaged by their teachers. They are adult in body but children in responsibility and in their contribution to others. Placed in such a no-man's-land between irresponsible dependence and accountable independence, they are compelled to attend schools that do not thoroughly stimulate the interests of all of them and that, in too many cases, provide the uninterested child with the experience of failure and the mirror of denigration. (5:177-8).

Considerations for Prevention

In conclusion to their study, Senna, Rathus, and Siegel (19:493-4) suggest such measures as:

... extending open classrooms and modular time-blocking systems in order to better accommodate individual differences in attention span for academic endeavors; provisions of better equipped student lounges in which cigarette smoking is permitted; employment of less 'busy work' by teachers; use of more imaginative audio-visual techniques; adoption of a policy of a certain number of permissible 'cuts' for each subject so that cutting will not necessarily be associated with seclusive, clandestine activities and a concomitant accumulation of teacher-student hostility; and the use of 'sensitivity training' or 'T-Groups' in which frank discussions about teacher-student relations are encouraged. (19:493-4).

They further concluded that teachers and school officials would do better to attempt frank and open interpersonal relationships with students in dealing with their problems rather than turning away. This type of action might then

make it possible to determine the motivations of such adolescents in order to provide more meaningful counseling.

Novotny and Burstein (13:49-60) in a study of public school adjustment of delinquent boys after release from an institution, found that what seemed decisive in keeping the boys in school was that they had some support from a supervised environment or from interested people, or some success in an activity such as athletics. In contrast, a large proportion of the ones who dropped out had no such supervision or support to help them. They concluded that, "...graduation from high school could be the first real success that many of these boys have known and that it could make a meaningful difference in the course of their lives (13:51)."

Lichter, Rapien, Seibert, and Sklensky (10:2) in introduction to their indepth study in school drop-outs, report that, "In contrast to this drive toward better school programs is the fact that 40 percent of all children in the United States fail to complete high school; they are drop-outs (10:2)."

Numerous educational studies have made it evident that school drop-out is a complex problem to which there is no simple solution. But from these studies a highly significant inference can be drawn; rarely do children who are successful in school leave prior to graduation. The high school drop-out is usually a child who has failed in his general school adjustment. This failure is not necessarily a matter of a specific learning disability, but rather a broader 'educational' disability. (10:291-4).

The following is a summary of their ideas.

1. Behind almost every classroom problem is an emotional problem. Remember that children act the way they do for a reason. Try to understand the real source of the problem.

2. It is not possible for teachers to get along with all students or to handle all classroom problems with equal success. Do not be afraid to seek the help of others.

3. There is often more gratification in helping the maladjusted child than one that creates no problem.

4. Do not be the kind of teacher who is impossible to please. Children progress at different rates. Do not lose a student by giving up too soon.

5. We may have higher expectations of good behavior for the youngster who has been in difficulty for a long time than for the child who seldom misbehaves.

6. In handling disciplinary problems, make sure the punishment fits the crime. Relate it to the offense and to the youngster who has committed it. The way discipline is administered can either alleviate or aggravate the problem.

7. It is important to study carefully the information we have about troubled children and to use it to its fullest, not to prejudice, but to understand and search out clues for handling the problem.

8. Do not underestimate yourself. The observations of teachers are of great importance in understanding the troubled child.

9. Know your strengths and limitations. Refrain from making recommendations that seriously affect a child's living or family situation.

10. Use to the fullest the resources available to you within the school system and the community.

11. Remember that being called to school can be a frightening experience for parents. However they react, attacking them seldom accomplishes anything.

12. The philosophy of the school about problem youngsters makes an important difference in how helpful

the school and the teacher can be. The attitude of the school will affect and often determine how problems are solved. (10:291-4).

Kaplan (9:60) summed up the etiology of the school drop-out when he said:

Youngsters don't simply drop out of school. They are forced out by a curriculum which has nothing to do with their needs, by standards which they cannot measure up to, and by social forces they cannot comprehend. These millions of embittered, dissatisfied, discouraged drop-outs add to the problem of psychological disorder in the nation. (9:60).

The school that does not meet the needs of all its students may lose those it neglects. Because of a background that is so different from the middle class structure of most schools, the adolescent from the poverty or slum areas is often the first to drop-out. The school that does not take the time or trouble to learn how to successfully help this student adjust and find success contributes greatly to his emotional instability. When he feels unwanted, threatened and a failure, he runs from the source of his discomfort, the school. As a result of this failure he may seek status in a deviant manner, thus he becomes a delinquent and only adds to his problem. The drop-out may also be any other student who feels neglected, shut-off; or in some cases unchallenged and bored with unrealistic rules that stifle creativity, imagination and freedom. In search for a more stimulating and gratifying life he too may leave the school.

The problem of drop-outs and delinquency are forms

self-destructive behavior that happen within the school and in the classroom. If these two situations are to be prevented, the schools of America must take upon themselves the responsibility for promoting mental health among adolescents.

DRUG ABUSE

Evidence

The Joint Commission on Mental Health of Children (18:323) report that drug usage among adolescents from all walks of life is on the rise. The Commission contends that:

... the student drug user is a witness against the school he attends, and a witness against our society. He attests to a growing up experience which provides nothing more captivating, thrilling, or enticing than the heightened perceptiveness of the marijuana high; he is a symptom of a society in which many of the most talented, perceptive, and gifted must seek life's meaning entirely in the inner recesses of the mind and the eye. (18:326).

The lack of meaningful and challenging school experiences bounded by outdated rules and restrictions may be factors contributing to student use of drugs as a means of escape. (4:228).

Dr. Irene Josselyn in an interview (21:125-7) on youth and mental health, expressed her views on the adolescent drug user and the school in relation to this problem.

Question: The present adolescents are not only

questioning, protesting, and challenging, but they are also using drugs. How do you evaluate this phenomenon of taking drugs?

Josselyn: I see it as a problem that has to be separated into its component parts; no generalization is valid.

Of the groups of drug users with whom I have had experience, there are some adolescents who use drugs primarily because adults don't think that this is a good idea. This is a subcultural phenomenon--if parents say something isn't good, then there must be something good about it, the way to grow up is to think that your parents' attitudes are wrong. The great stress on drugs by adults has tended, among a certain group of adolescents, to foster the use of drugs; that is one way of rebelling, although certainly an unfortunate way.

There is another group of adolescents who are using drugs, as many have commented, as an escape; it is just too hard to find what they want in the world, and the drugs give them a way out. This group is perhaps the one we should be most concerned about, indicative that its members are unable to cope with the real world and are finding a substitute. There are many other ways of finding a substitute. I don't think that we should just put the emphasis on the fact that these adolescents are using drugs, but rather on what their drug use signifies.

There is another group of drug-using adolescents whose behavior, I feel, is indicative of where we have failed them. I don't want to blame the educational system because it simply reflects the outline; but we'll pick on them in order to show you what I mean.

We have given our young people, through their education, very little experience with good teachers who love the subjects that they teach and who stimulate emotional gratification from learning rather than demand factual learning only. The adolescent in his idealism and his sensitivity wants something that is beautiful. Some young people are using drugs because they don't know where else to find beauty; their background has given them mechanical learning rather than an emotional experience in learning. We certainly are not going to find an easy way to help this group. I do think that our early educational system has to be thought through again. With the demand for teachers, with the need to use many people not fully qualified as teachers, we are not getting dedicated teachers. Children are being taught facts, but not given a true educational experience. Certain adolescents are

seeking in the use of drugs what they did not find through education. (21:125-7).

Considerations for Prevention

Today there is a concern with drug education in our schools as a means to help prevent the problem of drug-abuse. At the same time, however, there is much controversy over the value or success of such programs. At a conference of Washington, D.C., area school officials, Louis T. Coulsen (12:170), anti-drug coordinator for Maryland schools in Prince George's County summed up the general feeling:

I guess I'm an expert on drug programs that don't work...Everything that educators have tried so far has been a failure. We are able to disseminate information on drugs, but in efforts to really modify drugs (usage), we just haven't found the key. (12:170).

Cornacchia, Bentel and Smith (4:3-4) state:

Numerous authorities have said they believe that educational programs have had little if any impact on students. Mounting evidence reveals this to be true. It has been stated that, although such programs may provide an increase in drug information, they may encourage student experimentation and use of mind-altering chemicals. (4:3-4).

The problem may not lie in drug education itself, but in the methods used in such programs. Thornburg (22:271) points out that much drug education has usually focused on the medical, legal, and social aspects of the drugs themselves. Weissman (16:271) has suggested that it is vital to change the emphasis from the drugs to the users. "If teen-agers understood their motives for using

drugs, they might be more willing to give them up (16:271)." Pearce (14:83-8), in an article on education and drug-abuse states:

It is contended that education has abdicated a part of its responsibility to youth. Educators have been primarily concerned with the tremendous reservoir of information confronting them and with the mechanics of facilitating the transferral of that information. It is proposed that to meet the challenge of the current drug phenomenon it will be necessary to humanize, in a sense, the approach to youth, to aim with curricula and methodology at the social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of the individual as well as the biological and intellectual dimensions. (14:87).

Cornacchia (3:193-7) lists drug-abuse as one of the difficult areas of teaching in health education. His concern about quality health education stems from the need for the promotion, maintenance and development of sound mental health in our children today. He believes that one of the factors leading to child and youth anxieties are, "...frequently poor educational programs in schools that tend to create an atmosphere conducive to emotional maladjustment and mental illness (3:194)." Cornacchia offers conclusions that could and should be applied to the total realm of education for greater success in teaching and for sound mental health development of students. He states:

The achievement of spiritual health, the morals-values emphasis, can only occur if education focuses on the learner as a person. Education must become humanized. The teacher must realize and accept his role not solely as a specialist in subject matter, but as an expert in knowing and understanding children, as one who is able to communicate with students, makes learning relevant, respects the dignity of people regardless of race, color and creed, gives students a

share of the power, permits freedom of expression in the classroom, and allows freedom to make choices but in doing so provides for a variety of alternative choices and in numerous other ways. (3:196-7).

SUICIDE

Evidence

Reese (15:224) in a study of educational environments and the circumstances surrounding the deaths of students who committed suicide found there was inadequate social identification within the school environment. These students were subjects of social isolation; unknown as individual personalities by both faculty and peers. The educational objective of student social competency and development of meaningful relationships, which are fundamental to good mental health and emotional well being, were not being met by the schools. Most of the schools centered on academic aspects of education rather than the social-emotional needs of the students. A further conclusion was that half of the students who committed suicide were doing failing or near failing work at the time of death; the schools were not taking steps to help the situation, but continued to pass students on, subjecting them year after year to failure and frustration. These extended periods of failure and frustration caused the students to develop poor self-concepts and contributed to feelings of self-worthlessness. "Since suicide represents

a confirmation of negative inner emotional tensions coupled with stressful external factors, education for these children was one stressful external factor (15:224)."

Considerations for Prevention

Jacobs (8:107-8) in discussion of prevention of adolescent suicide, relates to the school's role in such action. The initiation of preventative measures against suicide will require that school personnel reorient their goals, at least in part, to better achieve what adolescents view as the school's main virtue, i.e. to provide a place for them to meet and socialize with each other. Because school attendance is mandatory, the school can provide a place for socialization of adolescents, even those who feel lost and lonely. This socialization factor may be important in preventing the potential suicidal adolescent from taking action. However, when school personnel put learning first on the list and prohibit socialization, this potential suicide victim may never receive the reinforcement from the people around him that he needs so badly. If school personnel realize the importance of the school to the adolescent in his search for meaningful relationships, and do something to help implement the adolescent's efforts through a system of planned programs, the school will take a big step towards reducing suicides and suicide attempts among school aged children. (8:107-8).

Reese (15:225) offers the following recommendations to be considered by the schools in helping with adjustment problems of the students.

1. School must be recognized as a way of life and not merely an institution. Students, with the help of the school, must know meaningful social experiences in this phase of their lives.

2. The academic aspect of school life should be reevaluated. There are alternatives to present methods of evaluating students' work which are more educational and psychologically defensible from the viewpoint that students should be rewarded for realistic achievement and not punished for unrealistic nonachievement.

3. Suicide in school-age students is a dramatic and tragic phenomenon which, in part, underscores some of the stressful forces prevailing in the educational environment. Research clearly indicates that social isolation is associated with the act of self-destruction. Educators must direct more effort toward creating the opportunity for all students to achieve meaningful social relationships. Such involvement must not be left to chance, but must be structured if it is to help rectify maladaptive social behavior. (15:225).

The Task Force on Child Mental Health (18:322-3) recommends that all school officials and teachers be educated to the warning signs of adolescent suicide. The potential suicide almost always gives indications of his suicidal fantasies prior to actually committing the act. Knowledge of these signs, which are actually cries for help, may enable school personnel to prevent such action by giving attention to the child in trouble. Berg (1:228-9) offers clues to suicide that teachers should be aware of. He classifies the warning signs into three categories: observable changes in behavior; observable changes in

emotional factors; and other characteristics within the student's life space.

Sudden and unexplainable neglect in school work.
Decrease in ability to communicate.
Changes in daily living patterns.
Changes in social behavior.

Low-self esteem.
Depression.
Hallucinations and delusions.

A family life marked by long-standing conflict, accompanied by rootlessness or transience.
The death or loss of a parent or significant other.
A history of long-standing problems with recent escalation of certain of these problems. (1:228-9).

When a teacher becomes aware of these signs and fears suicidal thoughts in a child, he or she should not be afraid to intervene. The teacher's role is not that of preventing the suicide, but letting the student know that someone cares. Communication is the teacher's best and first form of intervention. The ultimate goal of the teacher after communicating with the child is to find someone capable of handling suicide prevention, and the task is not to stop until that person is found. (1:323).

The best defense against self-destructiveness in colleges and high schools is a climate respectful of individual differences and the diverse rates of student development, a faculty and administration sensitive to the individual needs and characteristics of students, and opportunities for open communication. (1:323).

STUDENTS SPEAK OUT

In an investigation of the school affect on adolescent mental health, probably the best source of all

are the adolescents themselves. The following accounts are the thoughts and feelings of adolescent students about their particular school experiences. These accounts may not have been originally written as reflections of the effect of the school on mental health, but that is exactly what they are. The first is a diary kept by thirteen year old Danny Hauben (6:85-107) of his experiences in a New York City public school during the 1968-69 school year. The entire diary is not presented here, but excerpts that reflect Danny's feelings about the school and his teachers. The second account is The Student Alliance Report, Wanted: A Humane Education (6:105-121), a report prepared by a group of students in Montgomery County, Maryland in the spring of 1969, to expose the detrimental effects of secondary schooling on the students it professes to help. A summary of their findings and recommendations are given.

Diary

September 30

I find that I am looking at my watch about every fifteen minutes without even realizing it. Schools are run by a time clock, so it makes my life run on a time schedule also. But why should I have to walk through the halls and get into the room in $1\frac{1}{2}$ minutes? Why couldn't it be 2 minutes or $1\frac{1}{4}$ minutes? I saw a school the other day with barbed wire on the top of the fence that surrounded the yard. Say, what are the schools turning into--prison camps?

November 14

I must say, I did so many things since the strike started. Went to three movies, the Planetarium and the Museum of Natural History. Went miniature golfing and to

Jay's and Edward's. Went to the Bronx Zoo and the park, to Central Park and the zoo, hiked to Yonkers, visited the Allied Chemical Building on 42nd Street and went to the U.N. I taught classes; learned about the history of education at a class given at Harvard, took an art course at Cooper Union; went to a play and to the Sanctuary at M.I.T. And all this without the help of my fabulous teachers and school.

November 19

School started again. Nothing different. The strike didn't change the ways of the kids or the teachers. But I have another hope now--my parents. I talked them into at least thinking about my side and maybe to start contacting people about schools. When you go to school, if you don't have anything to look forward to you're dead.

November 20

I think I lost my social studies book. This is a major crime, but it can happen so easily. Maybe I left it at home. Any little thing that happens to you in school that's not right or any mistake you make is like one piece taken out of you by the teacher, and by the end of the year, you're virtually nothing.

June 16

This year for me has been very active, much has happened to change my life. A lot of important things went on. School confused me more than usual and added extra unnecessary burdens. Well once school closes, I'll get a rest from its idiocies for the summer and then start the same old thing all over again next year. The thought makes me sick.

June 17

Last day. Today we have only three periods, we'll just be cleaning the rooms. Yesterday all our teachers who screamed at us all year said we'd been lovely students--we'd brightened up their lives. What bull! They hate us, just as we hate them, but now that school's over they're so happy they don't care what they're saying. They say things they don't really mean. (6:85-107).
SCHOOL'S OVER!!!!!!

Wanted: A Humane Education (6:105-121)

From what we know to be true as full-time students and researchers of the county school system (as well as from every attempt we know of to survey student attitudes in the county), it is quite safe to say that the public schools have critically negative and absolutely destructive effects on human beings and their curiosity, natural desire to learn, confidence, individuality, creativity, freedom of thought and self-respect.

More specifically, the county public schools have the following effects which are absolutely fundamental and crucial:

1. Fear--The school system is based upon fear. Students are taught from the onset that they should be afraid of having certain things happen to them: bad grades, punishment from authorities, humiliation, ostracism, 'failure,' antagonizing teachers and administrators are all things that terrify students as they enter first grade. These fears, which school officials use as a lever from elementary school through high school to establish and maintain order and obedience, have horribly destructive effects; they may be reflected in extreme nervousness, terror, paranoia, resentment, withdrawal, alienation; they may be visible, they may be submerged, but in either case these effects should be of utmost concern to those who value the human mind and spirit.

2. Dishonesty--Schools compel students to be dishonest. In order to be 'successful,' students must learn to suppress and deny feelings, emotions, thoughts that they get the idea will not be acceptable.

3. Approach to problems--It is soon clear to students what types of responses are likely to be successful at playing the school game. It is not, 'What is my own response to this question?', but 'What is the answer the teacher wants me to give?'

4. Destruction of eagerness to learn--The school system takes young people who are interested in the things around them and destroys this natural joy in discovering and learning.

5. Alienation--With its dishonesty and premium on dutiful obedience, the school system causes feelings of resentment and alienation.

6. Premium on conformity, blind obedience to

authority.

7. Stifling self-expression, honest reaction.

8. Narrowing scope of ideas..

9. Prejudice--By insisting that the schools remain pretty much isolated from ideas and cultures that do not blend in with those of the immediate community, school officials have the effect of solidifying and perpetuating local prejudices.

10. Self-hate--Perhaps most tragic is what the school system does to the emotional and mental attitudes and subconscious of its students. The system, for instance, is willing to and does label students as 'failures' at age eight, twelve, or seventeen. In addition to the fact that this often acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy, this has a cruelly damaging and degrading effect on students, and is inexcusable. Further, tension has been shown to be an integral part of the school experience, with very damaging effects. The self-hate which results can be directed inward or at others, but whatever the case, it is extremely unhealthy; a community which says it cares about human emotions and feelings should not permit this to go on.

Recommendations

1. Establishment of an ombudsman office, responsible directly to the Board of Education, to investigate and resolve complaints from students.

2. The school system must put an end to intimidation of students through abuse of college recommendations, grades, secret files and 'permanent record files' by school officials.

3. Students must have an important role in the shaping and implementation of courses.

4. Student input in teacher evaluation.

5. Tension and rigidity must be eliminated from the schools. Administrators must be made to stop constantly threatening students with arbitrary, almost whimsical disciplinary actions.

6. Hiring of educators and researchers to deeply examine what effect the school system has on a student's self-concept, creativity, and desire to explore and learn.

7. Elimination of letter grades.
8. Teachers must be encouraged and allowed to respond to the individual needs of their students. This will have to mean fewer regulatory restrictions, more flexibility.
9. Students must be given more control of choices; independent study, changing classes, setting own goals.
10. Rigid periods now being used in county secondary schools must be replaced with shorter and flexible modules.
11. Relevant courses must be developed to meet students interests.
12. Students should be free to arrange voluntary seminars to be held during the school day.
13. Expansion of the range of resources.
14. Informing students of their rights. Open communication with administrators.
15. Eliminate dress codes.
16. Seminars in human relations, racism and progressive teaching methods should be held for teachers.
17. School Board hearings for students.
18. Student voice on the School Board. (6:105-121).

Chapter 3

SUMMARY

For the student, much of what he knows of life and himself is bounded by the experiences of the school. For the adolescent in the midst of an identity crisis, these school experiences act as a potential influence on his emotional and mental development. This is not to say that the school should be held solely responsible for insuring proper adolescent mental growth, but to say that the school is one of the most important institutions influencing such development.

Evidence has shown that poor adolescent mental health, revealed in the form of self-destructive behavior, may be influenced by a school atmosphere that is failing to meet the individual needs of its students. Students are often influenced to become school drop-outs and juvenile delinquents when they are faced with a school atmosphere characterized by unstimulating curriculums, unrealistic rules and regulations and frustration of repeated failure. The bright but unchallenged student, restricted from creativity and freedom of thought, is as apt to leave the school as the student labeled "troublemaker." Both students may feel unsatisfied because the school has not taken enough time to recognize their needs and design a curriculum capable of meeting them.

The student drug user may be influenced by the same type of school atmosphere. When the adolescent cannot find something stimulating and gratifying in the school, he may turn to drugs for this fulfillment. The adolescent student is concerned with much more than factual information; he is going through a period of life in search for a new identity, he is no longer a child and not yet an adult. The adolescent is questioning himself, others around him, and the world in general in order to discover this new identity and a meaning in life. The school atmosphere that fails to consider the emotional and spiritual feelings of the adolescent may lose him to an artificial source of stimulation, drugs.

The fourth and most drastic form of self-destructive behavior that may be influenced by the school is that of adolescent suicide. Studies reveal that the educational objectives of student social competency and development of meaningful relationships, which are fundamental to good mental health and emotional well being, are not being met by the schools. The actual act of suicide cannot be blamed on the school atmosphere, but lack of recognition and acceptance by teachers and peers add to a feeling of self-worthlessness, and thus influence suicidal behavior.

Each selection of literature reviewed, concerning the influence of the school atmosphere on adolescent mental health in relation to self-destructive behavior, gave as its recommendation for prevention a more humanistic educational

process. The following points summarize these suggestions:

1. Educators should be selected to teach in our schools not only because they are concerned with "educating" young people, but because they care about the emotional well being of students.
2. Teachers and all school officials should know their student, their wants, needs, and interests and do everything possible to fulfill them.
3. School officials should be charged with the responsibility of knowing what the adolescent student needs most in order to insure him of an educational experience that will not lead him into mental trouble and self-destructive behavior.
4. Each school is unique in its own way, just as the students are; predeveloped recommendations should not be lifted from a book and applied to just any situation. It is advisable to keep abreast of related literature, but it is just as important for school personnel to research their own unique situations, their own students, their own school, and themselves to find their own answers.
5. Those people charged with educating adolescents today were not forced into their positions, they chose to take the challenge. Now they must take the time and effort to educate themselves and to care enough to create a school atmosphere that is both healthy and humanistic.

DISCUSSION AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Today education means more to most educators than a teacher standing in front of a classroom disseminating facts. More attention is given to the student who is viewed as a total person rather than just a body designed with the total person in mind; educators strive not only to teach facts, but to prepare students for life. Educators have discovered that without the skills to function as a happy

and secure person, all the knowledge in the world is useless. Therefore, the emotional and mental well being of students has become a consideration, at least ideally, for most educators today. Unfortunately, in spite of these good intentions, the schools themselves may be influencing behavior in students that is not in tune with sound emotional and mental health. If the occurrence of adolescent self-destructive behavior, in the forms of school drop-outs, juvenile delinquency, drug abuse and suicide, are indicators that the schools are not meeting the needs of their students, and they seem to be, then educators must continue to search for a more effective educational process. This means that the schools should not only be concerned with how they influence adolescent mental health, but they should strive to do everything possible to create a school atmosphere that is conducive to sound mental health and the prevention of adolescent self-destructive behavior. It is the belief of this author, as well as that of other sources, that a more humanistic educational atmosphere is what educators should be striving for. The following thoughts and recommendations are given in an attempt to aid educators in understanding what humanism in education means and how it can be used to prevent adolescent self-destructive behavior.

Know the Needs of Every Student

Set aside periods in your class for open discussion

of student feelings. Do not limit the topic of discussion; let the students set the pace. Some students will never be heard if you wait until they come to you. Make it a policy to also offer a period of written evaluation and expression for those students too shy to communicate orally. If students are hesitant to express their ideas or needs individually, use panel discussions, role playing situations, or other forms of group encounters. Ask the students for their ideas on ways to obtain this information. Share with other faculty members methods of discovering and meeting student needs. You need to know where your students come from, their backgrounds, and their interests. Never stop experimenting with ways to encourage students to express their feelings. Be a listener; let your students know you care about them and their ideas. Communicate!

Create the Opportunity for All Students to Know Success

Do not try to fit all students into one mold. Each student learns in their own way at their own rate; gear your teaching with this thought in mind. Discuss the goals you have designed for the class with your students, then let them express what they hope to gain from the class. Have the students set goals for themselves and together determine if what has been decided is fair. Adolescents need to experience decision making situations; allow for student involvement in curriculum design, course content, and teacher

evaluation. Students also need to learn how to handle responsibility and to be trusted with responsibility. Develop meaningful projects where the students are in charge of designing and carrying out an assignment. In this way you allow students to be free thinking, creative, and self-sufficient. Students will feel more success when they have accomplished their own goals in their own way. Make it a point to praise success rather than ridicule failure; look for the potential in every student.

Create a School Atmosphere that is Realistic and in Tune with Student Interests

Keeping students secluded from the "real world" may be harmful to their emotional and social well being. Students should not see one way of life in school and another outside of school. Student decision making and roles of responsibility are two ways to create a more true to life school atmosphere. In addition to these individual classroom methods, total school programs can be initiated to expose students to the "real world." Special interim programs can be designed to allow students a variety of courses in many subject matters. Mini courses can be taught by faculty members, students, parents, business men and women, community leaders; the supply of sources is as long as the imagination and the will to develop such a program. This type of learning situation would offer students the opportunity to go into the community, to pursue old interests, and to develop new

interests.

Most high schools currently have representatives from colleges coming to their schools to address college bound students. Similar programs should be devised for students who do not plan on going to college. Vocational schools and work study programs are often available for such students, but there are other students who may not know what they want for the future or how to obtain desired training. Consideration should be given to these students as well. One way to assist them is to bring into the schools representatives from several occupations and professions to talk to students. This can be done in all school assemblies or in classes relating to a specific field. The idea is to expose students to a variety of life experiences.

Utilize School Facilities After School Hours

Utilization of school facilities after school, on weekends and in the summer may serve several purposes. Civic or school programs offered at these times in areas such as music, art, sport and other areas of interest may serve as a source of success for students in a field they know and enjoy. Because the programs are offered in the school, they may serve to reinforce a positive attitude toward school and education for the students involved. These programs will also serve as a means of healthy recreation for students in

their free time. To be of even more value to students, such programs could utilize the students themselves as instructors and aids.

Allow for the Development of Socialization Skills of All Students

Neglecting the shy or less talented student is a quick way to influence self-destructive behavior. Adolescents need to feel important and cared for by both teachers and peers. Group work in class is a good way to let students get to know and work with one another. The school should also offer the time and activities for socialization of all students. Activity periods during the day is an excellent way of reaching all students and not just those who are already involved in after school programs. Effort should be made to get all students involved with activities, other students and teachers.

Focus on the Students and Not Their Problems

Preaching values is not an effective method of teaching adolescents. Discuss self-destructive behavior openly; help the students to discover why they exhibit such behavior instead of dictating "you shall not do this, or you shall not do that." This type of approach will demonstrate your concern for the students as well as require the students to search themselves for answers. They will become more respectful of you as a person and themselves for finding their own answers.

More Extensive Teacher Preparation

Teachers need to have more specific educational preparation in adolescent development. Courses devoted to careful study of each stage of development should be required. Basic requirements for teacher certification should include more courses in adolescent sociology, psychology and human behavior. Seminars and continued education on adolescent behavior, needs, and interests should be offered for teachers in all schools. Teachers who work with adolescent students should be as well versed on adolescence as they are on the subject matters they teach.

Develop a System of Fair Rules and Student Expectations

Students should know what is expected of them; they should also have a part in designing school policies. Once policies have been set, enforce them consistently. Sporadic, unrealistic demands and punishment will only serve to confuse and alienate the adolescent. Discipline should be used to help develop the adolescent, not to tear him apart; offer structure and not an atmosphere of mistrust and fear. Rules should be designed for the students, not against them.

Consider the Student as a Total Person

All of the previously mentioned suggestions point to a more humanistic educational atmosphere. If we are to develop the total person, attention must be given to both the cognitive and affective development of adolescents. In other

words, attention should be given to both intellectual and emotional development. Regard should be given to student interests, attitudes, and concerns. Students learn primarily by what they experience. If the schools are to allow students to reach their highest potential, to see what they can be and do, then school experiences should involve the total person. A move toward a more humanistic school atmosphere is necessary if we are to insure proper adolescent mental health and prevent adolescent self-destructive behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

It may be difficult for educators, those people among us who claim to be deeply concerned with the well being of their students, to accept the fact that they may be doing more harm than good to the mental condition of a vast number of today's adolescents. Review of literature concerning the school atmosphere and its affect on adolescent mental health in relation to self-destructive behavior has resulted in three major conclusions that support this hypothesis. The first being that the school atmosphere may have a detrimental influence on the mental development or emotional well being of adolescent students; second, emotional unrest in adolescents from school experiences may contribute to the expression of some form of self-destructive behavior whether it be dropping out of school, juvenile delinquency, drug-abuse or

suicide; and third, recommendations for a more humanistic atmosphere conducive to sound mental development in adolescents should be considered by the schools in order to help prevent such behavior.

These conclusions may be stated in another manner, in the form of questions; questions that teachers, counselors, principals, administrators and all school personnel concerned with adolescent mental health should be asking themselves.

1. Do I really even know what the term adolescence means? Have I ever taken the time to find out?

2. Do I know the special needs of the person in this stage of life?

3. How important am I, as an extraparental adult, to the adolescent?

4. Do I realize the importance of peer acceptance to the adolescent, and do I remember not to ridicule a student openly in front of his peers?

5. Do I find time to know my students as individuals and not just as a face or name?

6. Am I letting my students express their own views, or am I asking for an instant replay of my views?

7. Are my students comfortable enough to express their own views, ideas and to be creative?

8. Am I asking for the same degree of success from all students or am I fair in remembering that students develop at different rates?

9. Do I make it a point to help all students experience success and gain a feeling of self-worth?

10. Are we offering a curriculum that meets the needs and interests of all students regardless of class, maturity, race, or vocational interest?

11. Do we offer enough activities and time for all students to gain social gratification or do we just facilitate the bright, talented, and athletic students?

12. Do we give the students enough voice in policy making, curriculum design, teacher evaluation?

13. Does the school provide enough excitement and challenge to keep the adolescent student interested and in school?

14. Do school rules and expectations alienate or instill fear in students?

15. Is our system of evaluation fair to all students? Do we find time to give recognition to all students?

16. Is as much time and concern given to the emotional and social aspects of adolescent growth as to the biological and intellectual?

17. Do we listen to our students?

18. Do we really care, everyday, about the feelings and well being of our students?

19. Do we realize the adverse affect we may have on troubled adolescents when we do not meet their needs?

20. Have we done all we can to understand the adolescent, why he feels the way he does, and what we can do to help prevent emotional problems that may lead to adolescent self-destructive behavior?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Berg, Donald E. "A Plan for Preventing Student Suicide," Self-Destructive Behavior. ed., Hafen, Brent Q. Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co., 1972.
2. Cohen, A. Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang. New York: The Free Press, 1961, cited by Senna, Joseph, and others. "Delinquent Behavior and Academic Investment Among Suburban Youth," Adolescence. 36:481-94, Winter 1974.
3. Cornacchia, Harold J. "Teaching in Difficult Areas in Health," The Journal of School Health. 4:193-7, April, 1971.
4. Cornacchia, Harold J., David J. Benel, and David E. Smith. Drugs in the Classroom-A Conceptual Model for School Programs. Saint Louis: The C.V. Mosby Co., 1973.
5. Goodman, Paul, and others. Growing Up Absurd. New York: Random House, 1956, cited by Nettler, Gwynn. Explaining Crime. New York: McGraw Hill, Inc., 1974, pp. 177-8.
6. Gross, Ronald, and Paul Osterman ed. High School. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1971.
7. Hirschi, T. Causes of Delinquency. Berkley California: University of California Press, 1969, cited by Senna, Joseph, and others, "Delinquent Behavior and Academic Investment Among Suburban Youth," Adolescence. 36:481-94, Winter 1974.
8. Jacobs, Jerry. Adolescent Suicide. New York: Wiley-Interscience, John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1971.
9. Kaplan, Louis. Mental Health and Human Relations in Education. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959.
10. Lichter, Solomon, and others. The Drop-Outs. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963.
11. Nettler, Gwynn. Explaining Crime. New York: McGraw Hill, Inc., 1974.
12. Newman, Joseph ed. Crime in America-Causes and Cures. Washington D.C.: U.S. News and World Report, 1972.

13. Novotny, Elizabeth S., and Mario Burstein. "Public School Adjustment of Delinquent Boys After Release From a Juvenile Corrective Institution," Journal of Youth and Adolescence. 3:49-60, 1974.
14. Pearce, Janice. "The Role of Education in Combating Drug Abuse," The Journal of School Health. 2:83-88, February, 1971.
15. Reese, Fredrick D. "School Age Suicide and the Educational Environment," Self-Destructive Behavior. ed., Hafen, Brent Q. Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co., 1972.
16. R. Weissman. "Teens and Drugs: Monkey on Our Backs," Arizona Teacher. 1969, 57:10-13, cited by Thornburg, Hershel D. Contemporary Adolescence: Readings. Belmont California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1971.
17. Report of the Joint Commission on Mental Health of Children. Crisis in Child Mental Health, Challenge for the 1970's. New York: Harper and Row, 1969, 1970.
18. _____. Mental Health: From Infancy Through Adolescence. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.
19. Senna, Joseph and others. "Delinquent Behavior and Academic Investment Among Suburban Youth," Adolescence. 36:481-94, Winter 1974.
20. Schreiber, D. "700,000 Dropouts," American Education. June 1968, 4:5-7, cited by Kaplan, Louis. Education and Mental Health. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.
21. Shamsie, S.J. Youth: Problems and Approaches. Philadelphia: Lea and Febiger, 1972, citing I. Josselyn. "Youth and Mental Health: An Interview with Irene Josselyn."
22. Thornburg, Hershel D. Contemporary Adolescence: Readings. Belmont California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1971.
23. Toby, J. "Affluence and Adolescent Crime," President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice: Task Force Report on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime. Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967, cited by Senna, Joseph, and others. "Delinquent Behavior and Academic Investment Among Suburban Youth," Adolescence. 36:481-94, Winter 1974.

24. Williams, Sue. Nutrition and Diet Therapy. Saint Louis:
The C.V. Mosby Co., 1973.

ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH - SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR
AND THE SCHOOL ATMOSPHERE

by

KATHLEEN J. BIEGE

B. Ed., Washburn University, 1971

-

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1975

The purpose of this report was to examine the influence of the school atmosphere on adolescent mental health in relation to self-destructive behavior; self-destructive behavior being any behavior that is performed as the result of emotional or mental stress that has detrimental affects, mentally, physically or socially, on the well being of the individual involved. Those self-destructive behavior forms considered were school drop-outs, juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, and suicide. More specifically, the purposes of this report were: 1) to stress that the school should not be solely responsible for preventing self-destructive behavior, but that the school atmosphere does have a potential influence on sound mental health development of adolescents; 2) to present evidence that the schools may be contributing to the occurrence of adolescent self-destructive behavior; 3) to offer suggestions for creating a school atmosphere conducive to sound mental health.

Sources concerned with school influence on adolescent mental health were consulted as a part of this investigation. Examination of this material, in conjunction with material presented by the author in summary and discussion of the investigation, led to the following conclusions: 1) the school atmosphere may have a detrimental influence on adolescent mental health; 2) emotional unrest in adolescents resulting from school experiences may contribute to the expression of some form of self-destructive behavior whether

it be dropping out of school, juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, or suicide. It was also concluded that a humanistic atmosphere, devoted to sound mental development in adolescents, should be developed by the schools as a means of preventing such behavior.