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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 1969 over 6,000 students in grades four through six responded to a 72 item questionnaire. Of the 72, 11 include responses which suggest possible alienation of this age group. Each school's pupils produced a unique pattern of responses to the 11 items, which suggests that the immediate school environment is one contributing factor to the amount of alienation and the topics which generate feelings of alienation. On the item concerning autonomy-authority, about one-third indicated that they avoid thinking about their chances for success as an adult. About 25% felt that school had little relationship to life outside school. Approximately one child in six rejected the teacher in situations in which the teacher disapproves of what the student has done. About 26% reported that their parents never visited school. About 47% felt adults would not always do what they say they will do. It appears that schools might, by intelligently modifying their processes and content, better serve pupils who are now experiencing alienation. [Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document.] (KJ)

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EVIDENCES OF SCHOOL RELATED ALIENATION
IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PUPILS

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EVIDENCES OF SCHOOL RELATED ALIENATION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PUPILS

In the Spring of 1969 over 6,000 fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students enrolled in forty-two buildings in small town school districts in east central Indiana responded to a seventy-two item questionnaire. Eleven of these items include responses which suggest possible alienation of this age group.¹ These items define alienation as: absence of control over own life, unequal chances to succeed, absence of pride in accomplishments, school content as irrelevant to their lives outside school, willful school absence, absence of an understanding teacher, withdrawing when things go wrong at school, absence of parental verbal interest in school, parental avoidance of visiting school, and degree to which pupil saw adults as verbally undependable.

The communities of the school districts could best be described as rural but not agricultural. Several of the thirteen districts are county wide districts and include the county seat town of up to 10,000 persons. Most adults in these communities are employed by industry, although there are a number of professional people, a number of unskilled workers, and some who make a living in agriculture. Adults in the communities would probably be offended to hear themselves described as culturally disadvantaged, although in many of the homes there is a limited exposure to cultural activities other than those which are provided by the schools themselves, or by churches, and those experiences brought

¹Items are included in the appendix of this paper.

into the home on television. Almost every home would have at least one TV set, a newspaper, and two magazines.

All pupils in the school population responded and so this does not represent the limited or identified group but reports the perceptions of the entire population of students in the forty-two buildings. One mechanical adjustment was made. Rather than having every student respond to 72 items, 24 items were placed on a questionnaire and three questionnaires were used, with each questionnaire distributed to every third student. Thus, the responses represent a sampling of one-third of the population of over 6,000. In responding the students could never choose more than one response. The response sheets were scanned for multiple markings and where identified both marks were erased so that no data were generated for that item. Where mismarkings were numerous the response sheet was discarded.

The questionnaires were administered by members of the research team and the pupils were under the authority of a researcher at the time they were responding. During this period parallel data were being collected from teachers, and in situations where the teachers were present, they were working on questionnaires of their own. There were cases where obviously pupils could not read or did not make the responses seriously and these individuals were identified by moving among the pupils as they read and responded to the items. These response sheets were collected independently and covertly destroyed.

Each school's pupils produced an unique pattern of responses to the eleven data producing items which suggests that the immediate school environment is one contributing factor to the amount of alienation and

the topics which generate feelings of alienation. Several of the buildings serve communities of limited enough geographic areas and possess a social structure interrelated enough that local communication patterns might well exist. Thus, the local community might be a source of some of the differences from community to community.

In the data reported here grade level and sex are not identified, nor are data reported in a manner that it is possible to identify the impact of an individual teacher. The persons administering these questionnaires had worked with the teachers and administrators of the 42 buildings previously and collected similar data at the same grade levels two years previously. Longitudinal data are not a part of this report, however. To draw conclusions from questionnaire data it is important not only to know the choice students make but to know the responses from which they chose. Therefore, in reporting the data we will attempt to include the alternatives.

As indicated we have some parallel teacher data and this is of some interest. Over half the teachers judge they are less successful with alienated pupils and almost 80 percent of the teachers judge that the programs in these buildings are inadequate for alienated students.

In reporting data here, each of the forty-two buildings is treated as a unit and data are reported for the median school. In the appendix data for the first and third quartile building are reported and the range is given.

Autonomy - Authority

Coleman and his research reported in Equality of Educational Opportunity suggested a number of items that were extremely significant and one of

these contained the concept "Every time I try to get ahead, something or someone stops me."¹ This was modified to read, "Every time I try to improve my school work, something or someone stops me." One of four alternatives to this stem was; "This is often true for me." In the median school building, sixteen percent of the students, that is four or five students in a class of thirty, perceived themselves as often frustrated in attempts to improve their schoolwork.

The second item dealing with the concept of control over self was couched in the item, "When I grow up I'm almost sure I don't have a chance to succeed." The first alternative available was: "I seldom think about what it will be like when I grow up." In the median school approximately a third of the students chose this alternative and in seventy-five percent of the schools over twenty-five percent of the students chose this response. Thus, a large minority are not included in thinking about what the situation will be when they grow up. The second response to this item allowed students to choose: "I wonder if I have a chance to succeed when I grow up." In the median school twenty-five percent said this described their feeling. The third response allowed them to choose: "I'm almost sure I don't have a chance to succeed when I grow up." In the median school five percent indicated this accurately described their situation. In summary, one student in twenty, or one to two in every classroom, have already concluded by the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades they don't have a chance to succeed as adults and approximately a third of the students avoid even thinking about their chances as adults.

¹Coleman, James S. Equality of Educational Opportunity. Wash. D.C. U.S. Office of Education. 1966, p. 289.

School as an Institution

An item was headed with the stem; "The thing that I do in school that I'm most proud of is:" Then there were four activities listed. A fifth alternative was: "Nothing I do in school makes me proud." In the median school eleven percent chose this fifth alternative of no source of pride in any school activity. In one of the buildings twenty-eight percent of the pupils reported that nothing they did in school made them proud. The inter-quartile range, by building, was from seven percent through thirteen percent who chose this fifth response.

Another item asked pupils to compare and contrast the content of their schooling to what they learned and observed outside of school. Two responses offered were favorable. The second and third, however, indicated contradiction between in-school and out-of-school experiences. The second response stated: "School has little relationship to life outside of school." Twenty-five percent of the students in the median building chose this response with an inter-quartile range of twenty-one percent to thirty percent. In one school, no one chose this response and in one school forty-seven percent, or almost half, said that school had little relationship to life outside. In the same item, and thus in competition with the one already reported, a third alternative was: "Much of what I hear in school is contradictory to what I see and hear outside of school." In the median school thirty-two percent chose the contradictory classification as descriptive of their judgment. Inter-quartile range was from twenty-eight percent to thirty-eight percent and in the school with the most pupils choosing this response, fifty-three percent of the students said this described their school experience, in contrast with their out-of-school experience. The lowest percent of responses in any school was

fourteen percent. In summary, in the median school over half the students see their school experiences contradictory to, or with little relations to, life outside the school and in the buildings where the situation is most severe, up to eighty percent see no relationship.

Another item gave students an opportunity to say they stayed away from school just because they didn't want to attend. The first alternative for this was that they stayed away "one or two days during the past year." In the median building, seven percent said they had chosen to stay away one or two days "just because they didn't want to come." The interquartile range was from four percent to ten percent of the students who chose this response. For the second response, in the median school, one percent of the pupils indicated they chose to stay away "from three to six days just because they didn't want to attend." The inter-quartile range was from zero to two percent. In the median school there was no one who indicated that he stayed away more than three to six days, although there was at least one student in a third of the buildings who indicated he stayed away from seven to fifteen days. In fourteen buildings there was at least one student who indicated that he stayed away sixteen or more days the previous year "just because he didn't want to attend."

The School as Teacher

In one item the students were asked to judge the degree to which their teacher understood children. Response three to this was that my teacher understands children "almost none of the time" and response four, my teacher "never" understands children. In the median school three percent of the students chose the third response, my teacher understands children "almost none of the time." The inter-quartile

range was from zero to seventeen percent. In the median school, six percent of the students indicated that their teacher "never" understands children, with the interquartile range from five to thirteen percent. In one building forty-four percent of the students indicated that their teacher "never" understood them.

For one of the items the stem was: "when things go wrong at school, I usually:". The first alternative was, "think the teacher is treating me unfairly." In the median building, ten percent of the pupils saw the teacher as unfair when things go wrong. The inter-quartile range was from eight to thirteen percent. The third alternative for this stem was: "I wish I were younger and didn't have to go to school". In the median school five percent chose this response, with the inter-quartile range from three percent to nine percent. The fourth alternative was "I wish I were older and didn't have to go to school" and in the median school, eleven percent chose this, with seven percent to eighteen percent the inter-quartile range. Adulthood appears more attractive than childhood as twice as many prefer to be older to escape school than to prefer to be younger to escape. A fifth alternative was that I "want to get away and cry" and in the median school three percent chose this, although in a fourth of the districts no student chose this as an alternative. The inter-quartile range was from zero to four percent. About three students in the typical classroom, or one in ten, think that the teacher is unfair when things go wrong at school and approximately the same number wish they were old enough to leave school while another one-twentieth would like to have the opportunity to be too young to be subject to a teacher.

"When the teacher doesn't like what I've done," was the stem of another question. There were three alternatives that were considered. The second alternative was that under these conditions, "I stop trying to please the

teacher." In the median school seven percent of the students chose this, with an inter-quartile range of four percent to twelve percent. The fourth response represents rejection of the teacher and was stated, "I don't care what the teacher thinks." In the median school eight percent of the students chose this, with an inter-quartile range from four percent to thirteen percent. When responses four and two were combined within school buildings, in the median school sixteen percent chose one or the other of these two alternatives, with an inter-quartile range of twelve percent to twenty-two percent. The third alternative for this question was, "I could do better but I don't feel well." This suggests either actual or imagined withdrawal from the situation. Eighteen percent of the students in the median school chose this response, with an inter-quartile range of twelve percent to twenty-three percent. In summary, approximately one child in six rejects the most powerful authority figure outside the home in situations in which the teacher doesn't like what the student has done.

Parents and School

Parental attitude has often been demonstrated to influence the attitude that children have toward school and one question asked, "How often do you and your parents talk about your school work?" The first alternatives represented frequent discussions but the third alternative was "once or twice a month." In median school, the third alternative was chosen eight percent of the time. The fourth alternative was "never," which in the median school was chosen seventeen percent of the time. The distribution of responses to this item would indicate that the students perceived their parents as talking frequently about school or not talking about it at all. When the responses to the items are combined within buildings, in the median

building twenty-six percent of the students indicated that they talk with their parents about school only once or twice a month and one child in six reports that he never talks with his parents about school. In the median building a fourth of the students talked less frequently than every two weeks.

The parent visitation at school is one indication of the level of interest and in one question the response was possible that parents haven't visited at any time. In the median school over twenty-six percent of the pupils report that the parents had never visited school. In this item the inter-quartile range was twenty percent to thirty-one percent and in one building half the students indicated that their parents had never visited school.

Trust in Adults

"Adults sometimes do not do what they say." This was one of two possible negative responses to an item. In the median building, thirty-one percent of the students chose this with a fairly narrow inter-quartile range of twenty-eight percent to thirty-six percent. The fourth alternative to this question was, "Adults very often do not do what they say they will do," and in the median building fourteen percent chose this with an inter-quartile range of ten percent to twenty percent. When responses three and four are combined within buildings, forty-seven percent of the students in the median school said adults "sometimes" and "very often do not do what they say they will do." The inter-quartile range was forty percent to fifty percent. Thus, the level of confidence in adults would indicate from forty percent to fifty percent of the students in each classroom would think that very often or "sometimes" adults do not do what they say they will do.

Summary

The fourth, fifth, and sixth grade pupils in the median building of a population of forty-two buildings in east-central Indiana report various levels of alienation, but evidence of alienation exists in every building. Over 6000 pupils are served in the population of schools.

One student in six judges that his attempts to improve his school work are frustrated by forces outside his control.

One student in twenty is sure he has no chance to succeed as an adult and another one in four are uncertain about their success as an adult. Still another third of the pupils avoid thinking about their adult lives.

One student in nine finds no source of pride in school.

Over half the students either see little relationship between what they learn in school and life outside, or find school experience contradicts out-of-school learning.

One child in fourteen misses a day or two of school a year just because he didn't want to attend.

One child in fourteen judges his teacher to have little understanding of children.

When things go wrong at school; one child in ten thinks the teacher is treating him unfairly, another tenth wish they were older and didn't have to attend school, and another one in twenty would like to be too young to attend school.

One child in fourteen stops trying to please the teacher when the teacher doesn't like what he has done, another one in sixteen rejects the teacher's judgment, and one in five pleads illness.

For one-fourth of the students, parents do not mention school oftener

than once or twice a month, including the one student in six whose parents almost never mention school.

For one-fourth of the students, parents have not visited school in the past two years.

One student in three judges that adults sometimes do not do what they say they will do, and another one in seven judges that adults very often do not do what they say they will do.

Implications

In many of the reported situations there are possible modifications in school practices which might reduce the student's sense of alienation. Significant tasks at which the student would succeed might be arranged under conditions completely controlled by the pupil who judges his life is beyond his control. These tasks might be organized in a manner as to become sources of pride for pupils.

Systematic, but occasional, study could be arranged in which a wide range of adult roles might be examined for a variety of "success" components.

Content of instruction should be examined by both pupils and teachers for congruence with out-of-school experiences of pupils, and out-of-school experiences should be systematically examined with pupils as definitions and convictions concerning "reality" are developed.

Working with pupils at the activities suggested here plus a study of research on pupils and careful observation of pupils might lead teachers to behave in ways that would convince pupils that teachers understand pupils. With this teachers might help pupils' intelligent modes of behavior for times "when things go wrong," thus further reducing withdrawal or hostility in crises.

More attention to programs that involve parents in school and strenuous attempts to include the parents of every child might help with the child's valuing of school and sense of personal worth.

Schools have little influence over the veracity of all adults, but still schools might examine their own regulations and adult behavior patterns and eliminate situations in which pupils see duplicity in the institution. Instructional units focusing on paradoxes and conflicting positions in the larger culture could be taught in ways which might help to deal effectively with conflict in human existence rather than despairing.

In summary, it appears that schools might, by intelligently modifying their processes and content, better serve pupils who are now experiencing alienation.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire items soliciting self-report data on alienation from fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade pupils. Only the responses for which data are reported were utilized. Forty-two buildings supplied data. Data are reported for the buildings at the First-Quartile, the Median, and the Third-Quartile.

| | <u>1st Quartile</u> | <u>Median</u> | <u>3rd Quartile</u> | <u>Range</u> |
|---|-------------------------|---------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| 13. Every time I try to improve my school work something or someone stops me. | | | | |
| 1. This is not true for me | | | | |
| 2. This is often true for me | 10% | 16% | 22% | 4-28% |
| 3. Sometimes this happens, but not very often | | | | |
| 4. I'm not sure I understand this question | | | | |
| 67. In thinking about what will happen when I grow up. | | | | |
| 1. I'm sure things will turn out well for me | | | | |
| 2. I wonder if I'll be able to succeed | 19% | 25% | 29% | 12-46% |
| 3. I'm almost sure I don't have a chance to succeed when I grow up | 3% | 5% | 6% | 0-17% |
| 4. I seldom think about what it will be like when I grow up | 25% | 32% | 36% | 8-64% |

| | | | | |
|---|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------|
| | | | | 14 |
| | <u>1st</u> | | <u>3rd</u> | |
| | <u>Quartile</u> | <u>Median</u> | <u>Quartile</u> | <u>Range</u> |
| 49. The thing which I do in school that I am most proud of is: | | | | |
| 1. Being neat and prompt in my work | | | | |
| 2. Helping the teacher in the classroom | | | | |
| 3. Getting good grades on my report card | | | | |
| 4. Being well liked by all the students | | | | |
| 5. Nothing that I do in school makes me proud | 7% | 11% | 13% | 0-28% |
| 32. During the last two or three years, it seems to me that: | | | | |
| 1. School is much more directly related to life outside of school | | | | |
| 2. School has little relationship to life outside of school | 21% | 25% | 30% | |
| 3. Much of what I hear in school is contradictory to what I see and hear outside of school | 28% | 32% | 38% | 14-53% |
| 30. During the past school year, did you ever stay away from school just because you didn't want to come? | | | | |
| 1. No | | | | |
| 2. Yes, for 1 or 2 days | 4% | 7% | 10% | 0-20% |
| 3. Yes, for 3 to 6 days | 0% | 1% | 2% | 0-5% |
| 4. Yes, for 7 to 15 days | 0% | 0% | 1% | 0-7% |
| 5. Yes, for 16 days or more | 0% | 0% | 1% | 0-5% |
| 34. Does your teacher understand children? | | | | |
| 1. Almost all the time | | | | |
| 2. Sometimes | | | | |
| 3. Almost none of the time | 0% | 3% | 7% | 0-13% |
| 4. Never | 2% | 4% | 6% | 0-31% |

| | <u>1st Quartile</u> | <u>Median</u> | <u>3rd Quartile</u> | <u>Range</u> |
|---|-------------------------|---------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| 53. When things go wrong at school, I usually: | | | | |
| 1. Think that the teacher is treating me unfairly | 8% | 10% | 13% | 0-24% |
| 2. Try to see why things went wrong and work harder to correct them | | | | |
| 3. Wish that I were much younger and didn't have to go to school | 3% | 5% | 9% | 0-35% |
| 4. Wish that I were much older and didn't have to go to school | 7% | 11% | 18% | 0-40% |
| 5. Wish that I could get away some place and cry | | | | |
| 54. Which one of the following best describes the way you feel when the teacher doesn't like what you have done: | | | | |
| 1. I try to find out what the teacher wants so I can do that | | | | |
| 2. I stop trying to please the teacher | 4% | 7% | 12% | 0-36% |
| 3. I know I could do better except that I often don't feel well | 12% | 18% | 23% | 0-39% |
| 4. I don't care what the teacher thinks | 4% | 8% | 13% | 0-23% |
| 45. How often do you and your parents talk about your school work? | | | | |
| 1. Just about every day | | | | |
| 2. Once or twice a week | | | | |
| 3. Once or twice a month | 5% | 8% | 13% | 0-20% |
| 4. Never, or hardly ever | 12% | 17% | 20% | 0-32% |
| 48. During the past year or two, has your mother or father visited school during the time that school was in session? | | | | |
| 1. Yes, my mother or father have visited at least once in the past two years | | | | |

| | <u>1st Quartile</u> | <u>Median</u> | <u>3rd Quartile</u> | <u>Range</u> |
|--|-------------------------|---------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| 2. My mother or father have visited school but not during class time | | | | |
| 3. I don't remember that my mother or father have visited school at any time during the past two years | 20% | 26% | 31% | 8-50% |
| 69. Which of the following statements do you think is most nearly true? | | | | |
| 1. Adults <u>always</u> do what they say they will do | | | | |
| 2. Adults <u>usually</u> do what they say they will do | | | | |
| 3. Adults sometimes do <u>not</u> do what they say they will do | 28% | 31% | 36% | 13-48% |
| 4. Adults very often do <u>not</u> do what they say they will do | 10% | 14% | 20% | 0-36% |