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ABSTRACT

In recent years a number of new institutions; i.e., "street academies", have been established to educate students who have dropped out or are prone to drop out of inner city secondary schools. There is reason to believe that many of these schools have been successful with youths who had not succeeded before, and therefore that lessons might be derived to help improve regular inner city schools. Some street academies enroll mainly young people who have done very poorly and either have dropped out or are on the verge of dropping out of regular public school programs. Some primarily serve youths who not only are dropouts or prospective dropouts but also have been classified by one or another institution as delinquent or pre-delinquents. Some are limited mostly to educating college bound students. What exactly has been taking place in street academies which apparently have been functioning with a good deal of success? What follows in this paper is a brief analysis based primarily on several of the (relatively few) written descriptions of street academies which have been published. This analysis is offered in three parts: (1) an enumeration of principles derived from program descriptions and the first-hand accounts of staff, students, and/or visitors to several of the leading academies; (2) identification of several additional possible reasons for success which are less obvious and are seldom if ever cited explicitly in the literature; and (3) speculation on one global, difficult-to-objectify, program characteristic that may be particularly important in accounting for the success of outstanding examples of the street academy approach. (Author/JM)

EDUCATING ALIENATED INNER CITY YOUTH: LESSONS FROM THE STREET ACADEMIES

Daniel U. Levine

In recent years a number of new institutions have been established to educate students who have dropped out or are prone to drop out of inner city secondary schools. These institutions have been variously called "storefront schools," "street academies," "mini-schools," and, in the case of some which officially are part of public school systems, community "outposts." Except where specific schools are referred to later, for shorthand purposes these institutions frequently will be referred to simply as "street academies" in the remainder of this paper.

As suggested in the title, there is reason to believe that many of these schools have been successful with youth who had not succeeded before, and therefore that lessons might be derived to help improve regular inner city schools. To credit this possibility, one need not believe that all street academies have been successful, but only that some have been able to provide effective education for a substantial proportion of young people who probably would not have learned much in regular schools. This would be enough to place them in a distinctly different class of phenomena from "standard" inner city secondary schools, which to my knowledge have not produced a single representative that unabashedly could be called "successful."

There are several varieties of street academies. Some enroll mainly young people who have done very poorly and either have dropped out or on the verge of dropping out of regular public school programs. Some primarily serve youth who not only are dropouts or prospective

dropouts but also have been classified by one or another institution as delinquents or pre-delinquents. Some are limited mostly to educating young people who indicate a hope to go to college and already have acquired basic skills in reading and writing.

Not all street academies, however, are designed so specifically to serve a particular target group. One of the important questions which apparently has not been directly researched anywhere is whether or not it is possible to run a successful academy enrolling in the same program both barely-literate pre-delinquent youth and college-aspiring (though alienated) students who already have acquired secondary-level skills in academic subjects.

Despite the lack of solid research evidence on this issue, it can be said that some of the best-known street academies do concentrate mainly on one or another type of student differentiated mainly by all but functional illiteracy on the one hand and a degree of academic competence on the other. Among the most widely-acclaimed and best-established of the street academies, for example, is the Harlem Preparatory School (Harlem Prep) in New York City, which stands at the apex of a system of 1) mini-schools emphasizing fundamental academic skills for dropouts from regular public schools; and 2) "transition" academies which offer further preparation for students who have not yet attained at least an eighth or ninth-grade reading score.

Instruction at Harlem Prep is based on the idea that many inner city students will perform better academically if they are motivated to learn material in a context that encourages the pursuit of individual interests. For this reason, subjects are not taught in highly

discrete courses; instead topics in which students become interested during discussion are pursued in a variety of manifestations (e.g. social sciences, humanities, physical sciences, mathematics, etc.). Students work individually and in small groups, with a good deal of personal assistance from staff members and a definite insistence on attaining high academic standards. An attempt is also made to keep the institution relatively small so that students and staff can maintain close contact and identification, and emphasis throughout the program is placed on combatting racism and social injustice of any type or origin.

An example of a program limited to students with minimal academic skills and little or no demonstrated readiness to engage in college-preparatory studies is the Farragut Outpost operated as a semi-autonomous branch of Farragut High School in Chicago's Lawndale neighborhood. The young men who agree to attend the Outpost generally have been identified as "potential dropouts" by counselors, and they usually arrive "full of suspicion and doubt" (3:8, 21). The atmosphere at the Outpost has been described as "very relaxed and permissive" (3:12); staff dialogue with students is intense and frequent, with an emphasis placed on developing "truth" and "trust" in personal relationships (3:13); and the program includes shop and vocational studies as well as academic studies designed to yield (i.e. correlate with) credits at the regular high school. Each staff member's "responsibilities are many and varied . . . /including assumption of/ the role of administrator, counselor, teacher, tutor, maintenance, custodial, father image, and clerical" (3:11).

What is the evidence that street academies have been successful

in improving the academic achievement of alienated inner city youth? In the case of preparatory-level schools which send their graduates directly to college, encouraging data have been reported for the Christian Action Ministry (CAM) Academy in Chicago as well as Harlem Prep. Eash and his colleagues at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle conducted an evaluation of CAM and found that a group of students who attended for two years registered clear gains in language and mathematics (but not reading) beyond what they might have been expected to achieve based on previous performance in the public schools.(1). Headmaster Edward S. Carpenter of Harlem Prep has reported an average gain of two years in reading--from 9.0 to 11.0--for the "average" student who typically "remains at the Prep for one year" (2, p. 9). By 1969, Harlem Prep had placed 174 students in college, and there is no reason to doubt Carpenter's assertion that few if any of these graduates would have been prepared for or enrolled in college without the opportunity to attend an academy-type preparatory school.

Similar empirical data apparently have not been widely published on other types of street academies But the enthusiasm shown not only by students but also by reliable observers at some of these schools combined with the undoubted fact that many students have earned high-school equivalence certificates or entered college after attending such institutions support the conclusion that some have been successful.

In addition, fragmentary evidence from several street academies also indicates that they are achieving their goals at least in part. For example, a clear decrease in truancy and an increase in credits earned were registered among the 21 students who regularly attended the Farragut High School Outpost in Chicago in 1968-69 (3:23), and the

mini-schools sponsored by the Urban League in New York unquestionably have helped hundreds of inner city youth achieve sufficient gains to enter the transition academies and then Harlem Prep. All in all, it seems justified to view the street academy as a possible source of ideas and principles for reforming secondary schools in the inner city.

What exactly has been taking place in street academies which apparently have been functioning with a good deal of success? What might account for their achievements in working with young people whom regular public schools obviously had failed to educate? What follows is a brief analysis based primarily on several of the (relatively few) written descriptions of street academies which have been published in popular journals or the professional literature. This analysis is offered in three parts: 1) an enumeration of principles derived from prohram descriptions and the first-hand accounts of staff, students, and/or visitors to several of the leading academies; 2) identification of several additional possible reasons for success which are less obvious and are seldom if ever cited explicitly in the literature; and 3) speculation on one global, difficult-to-objectify, program characteristic that may be particularly important in accounting for the success of outstanding examples of the street academy approach.

Typical Program Characteristics

1. Smallness. One obvious distinguishing characteristic of the street academy is that it is a small institution as compared with the regular secondary school. The typical academy includes anywhere from fifteen to fifty students at a time, with two-to-four teachers plus other paraprofessional and non-professional personnel. A regular-school outpost may be limited to twenty or thirty students. Even a

relatively large program such as Harlem Prep has only 150 to 250 students.

2. Close Tie-In with the Community. One reason why street academied often are located on or near busy streets is to allow for easy access to and contact within the communities they serve. Usually, so-called "street workers" who live in the community are employed to recruit students and generally to bridge the gap between the school and its public. Frequently an explicit effort is made to encourage study in the community by focusing part of the curriculum on local conditions and/or by obtaining work-study assignments for students who want to earn money while continuing their education. (The street workers and other staff usually take responsibility for helping students deal with problems of daily living in their families and neighborhoods.) Similarly, staff and students at the Farragut High Outpost in Chicago bowl together in the local community, partly in order to strengthen relationships between the two groups (3: 19). In these and other ways, a definite attempt is made to eliminate some of the barriers that generally divide the traditional school from the culture of the inner city.

3. Non-traditional Bureaucratic Structure and Operation. Related to the characteristics mentioned above is the obvious effort--or goal--to make the academies function in a manner other than that we associate with the formal bureaucracy of the traditional school. The size of the institution is limited so that students can be treated as individuals and can interact therapeutically in small groups. Staff and students tend to interact informally while rules and regulations are group-determined and flexible rather than imposed from above and invariant.

Teachers and other staff members meet frequently and often help discharge each other's responsibilities, so that fixed distinctions cannot be made between the roles of various specialized personnel or between specialists and non-specialists. Policies and procedures are explicitly and avowedly designed to make students feel their fundamental social and academic problems are being individually attended to rather than processed and submerged in the machinery of a large, impersonal organization. Students as well as staff emphasize that since attendance is voluntary, students feel they are there because they made a decision to attend, and this makes it their responsibility to derive something constructive from the experience. In addition, teachers and administrators may take special care--as at the Farragut Outpost--to avoid getting bogged down in obtaining resources or handling administrative details, in order to make sure that they can give their fullest personal attention to their students (3: 22).

This characteristic has been labelled "non-traditional" bureaucracy rather than "anti-bureaucratic" because it does not denote the complete absence or negation of bureaucracy but rather an alternate approach that seeks to overcome the dysfunctions of traditional rational bureaucracy (4). The emphasis, in other words, is on lateral rather than hierarchical structure and on departing from the impersonal relationships of traditional bureaucracy, in order to develop a more "client-centered" or "needs-cycling" organization. But in a real sense bureaucracy still is present since bureaucratic characteristics such as utilization of educational specialists and standards for pupil performance continue to be necessary. And most assuredly, rules and regulations continue to be invoked, even if in a very different manner than in the regular high school.

Indeed, it would be rather astounding if successful street academies operated without clear rules and regulations in view of the large literature which testifies to the importance of structure in providing effective education for economically disadvantaged students (e.g. 5,6). But it should be kept in mind that rules and regulations are only one element in a definition of structure as applied to education in the inner city (7).

4. Individualized, Meaningful Learning Activities. Although little detailed information is available on the specific learning arrangements and methods at successful storefronts, it is obvious that they do not all use exactly the same instructional approaches to individualization. At CAM, for example, the instructional design is built around the use of learning centers which Eash describes as corresponding "roughly to classrooms" but at which attendance is voluntary and a "large variety of materials permits students to be self-pacing in their approach to instruction" (1:11). In addition, an effort is made to employ "directed, close-ended materials . . . with students who are less sure and have more limited skills" and "open-ended materials . . . for students who have the fundamental skills, but need to develop more complex approaches to knowledge."

At Harlem Prep, on the other hand, learning centers for different subject fields were not emphasized but instead stress was placed on orienting

> . . . the curriculum toward the development of skills and knowledge, stimulation of curiosity, development of individual research techniques, development of criteria for evaluation of self and others, and development of tolerance to accept the evaluation and criticism of others. Methodologically, an interdisciplinary approach

> was utilized in all subject areas. Traditional subjects were taught with a view toward bridging the gap between theory and its application to current social problems. Therefore, knowledge and skills learned were immediately used in solving problems within the subject area. This provided for individual assignments and individual research (2:7).

As is implicit in the foregoing descriptions, successful street academies place great stress on making the curriculum as meaningful as possible in terms of students' experiences and interests. Much of the instruction is given through small-group discussion, curriculum materials are constantly related to and drawn from the urban environment in which students live, and in some instances instruction is given by taking students out into the local or metropolitan community for field-based learning experiences. Thus staff at the Farragut Output in Chicago consider the automobile to be "an integral part" of their effort "to enrich our curriculum" by using "the Metropolitan Area as a classroom" (3:14).

5. Clear and Attainable Objectives. In one way or another, successful street academies seem to have found ways to offer students clearer and more effective incentives to learn than is true in regular high schools. Evaluators at CAM, for example, felt that use of the G.E.D. test as the major goal for students to attain provided a clearer and more accessible incentive than the usual sets of graduation requirements at their previous schools. Similarly, the three-tier system leading to Harlem Prep almost certainly serves as a more effective incentive than regular secondary-school goals because students can move up and out of the lower school and the transition academy as soon as they have attained satisfactory levels of performance in basic skills; in addition, Harlem Prep's proven record of placing

graduates in college certainly must operate as an important incentive for many students at each level. The emphasis on individualization at successful street academies also makes it easier to set attainable goals for students in their day-to-day studies. Finally, the frequent differentiation (see above) between very low-achieving students on the one hand and college-aspiring students on the other makes it possible to focus respectively either on literacy or college preparation.

Less Obvious Considerations

Besides the characteristics enumerated above, additional considerations which might help account for the success of street academies include some which are easily overlooked when one is preoccupied with the manifest aspects of a functioning organization. Sometimes, that is, what is absent may be as important as the concrete characteristics that define the program one is attempting to describe. Several of these considerations are cited in the following section.

1. Selectivity in the Student Body. As mentioned above, attendance at street academies usually is voluntary, partly because their students may have dropped out of or been expelled from regular schools. More important, on an ideological basis it is thought that students take more responsibility for their learning if they are not required to attend.

This means, of course, that some students who may have been responsible for substantial disruption in regular classrooms do not choose to enroll. It also means that students who enroll in but do not attend the street academy may sometimes be those who might make the teaching-learning situation much more difficult if they were present regularly. At Farragut Outpost, for example, 49 young men

were enrolled in the first year, but only 21 attended consistently (3:21). It is possible that results would not have seemed so favorable had more enrollees been consistent in their attendance.

2. Selectivity of the Staff. Because street academies have been small, innovative organizations, administrators have been able to hand-pick teachers and other staff who seem particularly suitable and are attracted to exciting new programs. Administrators are quite justified in doing so and indeed would be remiss if they did not. But the natural selectivity in this process raises questions concerning the extensibility of the academy model to other sites on a significant scale.

The point is far from minor. Those who have worked in inner city schools know how easy it is for a few poor or even average teachers to foul up substantial plans for institutional improvement. Because students respond to the total institution, and because some may be expert in playing off one teacher against another, a few less-than-outstanding personnel can have a negative effect far beyond what might be anticipated in view of their proportion on the staff. This observation is in no way meant to serve as an argument against extension of the concept, but only as a caution to anyone who might think it a simple matter to successfully re-organize existing schools according to lessons derived from experience at the academies.

Parenthetically, it also should be noted that successful street academies--at least the highly publicized ones--have been founded and administered by outstanding individuals who are willing to take unconventional administrative "risks" and also are able to provide some degree of charismatic leadership. This is no different, of course,

than is true with respect to the few relatively successful inner city elementary schools one can find, which invariably turn out to have truly rare and outstanding principals. But the point should be made explicit nonetheless, lest someone think one can reform regular schools effectively on the academy model without first choosing unusually capable and vigorous administrators to head them up.

3. Role of the Streetworker. Because the streetworker is a nonprofessional from the same community and often is not much older than the students, in certain respects he is able to act with fewer restraints than can the professional staff. For example, streetworkers can speak more consistently in the idiom of the streets than can teachers whose image as a model to emulate might be ruined if their use of this language became too frequent. In addition, the streetworker can be firmer when firmness is called for because he has a sort of "kinship" that enables him to be direct and forceful in his relations with students. And since his performance is judged so directly on how well he succeeds in convincing his charges to attend and perform themselves,

> . . . words like patience, understanding, frustration, and defeat, which characterize the attitude and conversation of teachers and welfare workers, have no place in the streetworker's vocabulary. . . . the streetworker always keeps in touch with a youth, helps him to resolve a problem that is keeping him away, or is a disciplinarian if there is no good reason for absence. He can be tougher on youth than any teacher would dare or be allowed to be (8:39).

Again, the implication is not that street academies should be discredited because they have found a way, perhaps, to introduce a "disciplinarian" who can be firmer than any teacher "would dare or be allowed to be." Rather, the conclusion which follows is that

educators who decide to emulate the street academy had better consider including streetworkers or some equally effective surrogate in extending the model to regular inner city schools.

In addition, it is possible that other less visible characteristics such as separation of students by sex may play an important part in accounting for the success of some outstanding street academies. Whoever hopes or intends either to establish an academy or to remake regular inner city schools in its image would do well to note such characteristics as well as the more obvious ones described in official reports.

A Speculative Proposition

There are several additional goals which are not always highlighted in brochures but which I believe may play an important part in accounting for the success of the better street academies. These goals have to do with coming to terms with oneself as a unique and worth-while individual, with one's social and particularly racial background as a member of a minority group, and with the ways one shares in the pains and triumphs of all other human beings. Rather than spelling out these viewpoints in the dry language of social science, I would rather quote portions of Nikos Kazantzakis' "Spiritual Exercises" (9), which include a description of the successive stages through which

a person's thoughts move when he struggles to discern and understand his position in the cosmos.

The First Step, in Kazantzakis' vision, is centered on The Ego, and culminates in awareness that:

> Yes, yes, I am NOT nothing. A vaporous phosphorescence on a damp meadow, a miserable worm that crawls and loves, that shouts and talks about wings for an hour or two until his mouth is blocked with earth. The dark powers give no other answer.
>
> But within me a deathless Cry, superior to me, continues to shout. For whether I want to or not, I am also, without a doubt, a part of the visible and invisible Universe. We are one . . . I am not a suspended, rootless thing in the world. I am earth of its earth and breath of its breath.

The Second Step Kazantzakis labels The Race:

> Everything you do reverberates throughout a thousand destinies . . . When you shake with fear, your terror branches out into innumerable souls before and behind you. When you rise to valorous deed, all of your race rises with you and turns valorous. . . .
>
> Your invisible body is your dead ancestors and your unborn descendants. Your visible body is the living men, women, and children of your own race. . . .
>
> Fight on behalf of your larger body just as you fight on behalf of your smaller body. Fight that all of your bodies may become strong, lean, prepared, that their minds may become enlightened, that their flaming, manly, and restless hearts may throb.

The Third Step Kazantzakis calls Mankind:

> IT IS NOT you talking. Nor is it your race only which shouts within you, for all the innumerable races of mankind shout and rush within you: white, yellow, black.
>
> Free yourself from race also; fight to live through the whole struggle of man. See how he has detached from the animal, how he struggles to stand upright, to coordinate his inarticulate cries, to feed his flame between his hearthstones, to feed his mind amid the bones of his skull . . .

> Rise above the improvised bastion of your body, look at the centuries behind you. What do you see? Hairy, blood-splattered beasts rising in tumult out of the mud. Hairy, blood-splattered beasts descending in tumult from the mountain summits . . .
>
> Out of an ocean of nothingness, with fearful struggle, the work of man rises slowly like a small island.

Kazantzakis proceeds to describe a fourth step, The Earth, but perhaps it is quite enough to expect a secondary school to help its students grow in acceptance and wisdom toward the first three--one-self, one's race, and mankind. The importance of positive self-concept and of pride in one's ethnic heritage are, after all, widely recognized, and it may be equally important to feel that one is part of a larger group which embraces the past and the future of all mankind; how else can members of an oppressed minority function in the face of debilitating feelings that it is senseless to work toward overcoming the obstacles that restrict their opportunities?

I have no data to prove that successful street academies indeed are giving more than the usual lip-service to these three goals, but a reading of the rather limited literature on academies does suggest that their staff and sponsors tend to be humanistically-oriented people who understand that respect for oneself and commitment to humanity are themselves fundamental aspects of the process of education. And anyone who has ever heard Ed Carpenter describe the instructional program at Harlem Prep knows that that school's efforts to develop fundamental human understandings receive more than the usual lip-service, and amount to something more than an abstract goal stated as follows in his description of the school's formal philosophy:

> Service to the oneness of humanity; so that each student may consciously realize that he is a brother to all mankind, irrespective of religion or race. The thoughts of universal peace must be instilled in the minds of all the scholars, in order that they become the armies of peace, the real service of the body politic--the world. God is the Father of all. Mankind are His children. This globe is one home. Nations are members of one family (1:4).

Could this, perhaps mark an ideal and a commitment which as much as anything else are most conspcuously missing from the actual environment and programs in the great majority of public schools serving alienated youth in the inner city?

1. M. J. Eash, "A Curriculum Evaluation of an Academy for Black Drop Outs: The Alternatives in an Alternative School." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, February 1971.

2. E. F. Carpenter, "Harlem Prep: An Alternate System of Education," Paper presented at the Seventh Annual Work Conference on Urban Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, June 1969.

3. G. A. Austin, H. Phillips, and A. Watman, An Overview of Farragut High School Outpost (Chicago: Chicago Board of Education, August 25, 1969).

4. D. U. Levine, "Concepts of Bureaucracy in Urban School Reform," Phi Delta Kappan, v. 52, no. 6 (February 1971), 329-333.

5. J. P. Comer, "Summer Study-Skills Program: A Case for Structure," The Journal of Negro Education, v. 38, no. 1 (Winter 1969), 38-45.

6. D. Ekins, "Instructional Guidelines for Teachers of the Disadvantaged," The Record-Teachers College, v. 70, no. 7 (April 1969), 593-615.

7. R. C. Doll and D. U. Levine, "Toward a Definition of 'Structure' in the Education of Disadvantaged Students," Opening Opportunities for Disadvantaged Learners, ed. H. A. Passow (New York: Teachers College Press, 1972), 128-161.

8. R. Goldmann, "The Street Academy: A Way of Reaching Those Least Likely to Succeed," City, v. 3, no. 2 (April, 1969), 37-39.

9. N. Kazantzakis, The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960).