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An Exploratory Study of Delinquency and the Nature of Schooling

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The Problem

In previous work Braithwaite (1975) and Wilson and Braithwaite (1977) have argued that a less competitive school system might eliminate many of the structural strains which create juvenile delinquency. The present study investigates this hypothesis through an exploratory comparison of delinquent behaviour in competitive versus non-competitive school systems.

Change Individuals or Change the System?

Perhaps the most strongly and consistently demonstrated relationship in criminology is that children who fail in the school system have a higher probability of becoming delinquent than academically successful children.¹ Theorists such as Albert Cohen (1955) have explained this association with the proposition that being labelled as a failure by the school engenders bitterness towards it and the conventional values which it upholds. Children who fail at school form anti-school, anti-authority subcultures, in which they collectively solve their status problem by rejecting their rejectors.

The typical public policy response to the nexus between delinquency and school failure has been to suggest that an effective way to reduce delinquency would be to expand educational opportunities for failure-prone children—mainly blacks and the lower-class. A major motivation of the equality of opportunity programmes of the United States' 'War on Poverty' was a desire to reduce delinquency by giving blacks a stake in the system and a feeling that they had a chance of success.

Advocates of this kind of solution to delinquency are often blind to the limitations which the social structure of the

school and the structure of the capitalist economy place upon it. The status system within Australian schools approximates a hierarchy, with all children being given a ranking. The hierarchy need not be an explicit 'top of the class, second, third, . . . down to the bottom'; it may be less quantitatively 'one of the better students', 'an average student', 'a poor student'. Educational opportunities for failure-prone children only achieve a reordering of children in this hierarchy. But it is the hierarchy itself and the condition of being at the bottom of it which creates delinquency. Equality of opportunity does not change the number of children who end up in that condition. If we improve educational opportunities for aborigines, we do not change the fact that there will still be someone who comes bottom of the class—except that he may be white instead of black.

Indeed, equality of opportunity programmes (if in fact they work)² may actually **increase** delinquency. Wilson *et al.* (1976) and Braithwaite (1976: 93, 282-284) have shown that delinquency is not only related to outright failure in the school system, but also to failure to achieve the success either expected or aspired to, and perhaps also to worry about the possibility of failure. This is one reason why they argued for reduced competitiveness as a means of reducing delinquency—ameliorating absolute failure is not enough when there are various nuances of relative failure associated with delinquency. The net effect of equality of opportunity programmes is to decrease the probability that lower-class children will fail and to increase the probability of failure for middle-class children. Since middle-class children generally have higher academic aspirations, the

discrepancy between aspiration and achievement will be greater for middle-class failures than for lower-class failures. Thus, the effect of equality of opportunity policies should be to increase the number of children who have a wide gap between aspirations and achievement, and that implies more delinquency.

Consistent with this theory, Stinchcombe (1964) found that middle-class children who failed at school were greater discipline problems than were working-class failures. Subsequent studies by Kelly and Balch (1971), Kelly (1971), Frease (1973), and Polk *et al.* (1974) have all provided moderate to weak support for the hypothesis that middle-class school failures engage in more delinquent behaviour than working-class school failures. Polk (1969), however, failed to find any support for the hypothesis—academically unsuccessful working-class boys were found to be just as delinquent as academically unsuccessful middle-class boys.

Another possible reason for the middle-class school failure tending to become more delinquent may be because he is under greater pressure to succeed than the working-class school failure, and because he has further to 'fall' through downward occupational mobility.³

A further structural limitation on the equality of opportunity argument is that the economy, like the school, is partially a zero-sum game. The argument maintains that greater educational opportunities for poor children would mean that more of them would succeed at school and thereby go on to get desirable jobs. The fact that they could see bright prospects for a good career through the school would make them less likely to rebel against the school. The reality is, however, that in the context of a capitalist system, expanding the opportunities of one person contracts the opportunities of others. So in a slum, where there is usually high unemployment, upgrading the educational standard of one youth, so that he can get a job, will normally involve putting another person, who has not upgraded his educational standard, out of a job. If the management of demand in a capitalist economy at a particular point in time requires that five per cent of the workforce be unemployed, then we can educate the working-class until they are blue in the face, but that will not change the fact that five per cent of the workforce will remain unemployed. What we might achieve is a change in the make-up of the unemployed, such that those who receive the extra education are **less** likely to become

unemployed and those who do not receive it are **more** likely. If having brighter career prospects reduces pressures to commit delinquent acts, equally, dimming the prospects of others should increase their pressures towards delinquency.

Desirable though equality of opportunity may be on grounds of social justice, its efficacy for reducing delinquency is not as clear as the pundits of the War on Poverty had us believe. The alternative to policies which merely change the particular individuals who fail is to abolish failure altogether as a feature of the school system. It is possible to reduce the competitiveness of schools so that no children, middle-class or working-class, are disappointed and embittered through losing out in the competitive struggle.

Schools can function successfully by motivating children to achieve goals of absolute worth rather than by motivating them to do relatively better than other children. Many Australian schools are moving towards competition against the individual's own past performance instead of against the performance of other children. Under the *ipsative* model all students 'succeed' and none 'fail', since all improve their own past performance.

In summary, while the delinquency of individuals is likely to be reduced by measures to avert their failure at school, equilibrium forces operate in the existing economic and educational structures to ensure that this individual change is not translated into an overall reduction in the delinquency rate. Previous policy analyses have run onto the rocks because they have sought the solutions to a problem of **social structure** by changing **individuals**. The present research seeks to rectify this direction of enquiry by evaluating the effect on delinquency of a restructuring of schools along non-competitive lines such that failure is no longer built into their social structure.

The Study

The hypothesis to be tested here is that males attending non-competitive schools engage in less delinquent behaviour than males from competitive schools. A 37 item self-report delinquency questionnaire was administered to 576 male students at eight secondary schools in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, and two provincial cities, in 1975.

A self-report measure was chosen because of the ease with which it can be administered upon a captive school sample.

While the use of a self-report measure avoids many of the monumental biases inherent in official delinquency statistics, reliability and validation studies do not inspire unbounded confidence in self-report indices (Braithwaite, 1977). The method rises or falls on the question of whether respondents will give honest answers about their delinquent involvement. Some may tend to hide their delinquency, others may tend to exaggerate. In the discussion of the results, consideration will be given to an interpretation which turns upon the differential candour of respondents. All of the items in the present questionnaire had been pre-tested in previous self-report research studies conducted by one of the authors. In accord with the exploratory nature of the study, the 37 items cover a diverse range of types of delinquency.

No scaling of the items has been attempted for two reasons. First, the metric and distributional assumptions of conventional procedures such as factor analysis are grossly violated by the skewed J-distribution of deviant behaviour, so that criminologists should either use sophisticated non-metric models or analyse their data item by item (Braithwaite and Law, 1978). Second, in an exploratory study it is necessary to explore the unique effects of the independent variable upon each individual item.

Five of the schools were 'non-competitive' and three were 'competitive'. 'Non-competitiveness' was operationalised as the absence of a compulsory examination system or of any other method of ranking by academic merit. The non-competitive schools were institutions which were described as such by Schoenheimer (1973). Discussions with the staff and students at these five schools confirmed Schoenheimer's description that they were schools which lacked a system of competitive grading.

The selection of competitive schools for inclusion in the study meant finding institutions with traditional examination systems, streaming, and other meritocratic rating features, but which matched as far

as possible all other features of the non-competitive schools. This was not an easy requirement because the non-competitive schools were atypical in many significant ways. Two public Melbourne inner-suburb non-competitive schools of predominantly working-class clientele were matched by a public Melbourne inner-suburb competitive school with predominantly working-class students. One Sydney and one Melbourne private upper-middle-class non-competitive school in residential areas with a large number of children of university staff members were matched by a public Brisbane upper-middle-class competitive school in a residential area with a large number of children of university staff members. A working-class non-competitive school in a provincial city whose economy was based on a powerhouse and on coal-mining was matched by a working-class school in a provincial city in another State whose economy was also largely based on a power-house and coal-mining.

The age and grade distributions of the samples drawn from the competitive schools were designed to be the same as the distributions from the matched non-competitive schools. The average age of the non-competitive sample was 15.1 years and for the competitive sample, 15.3 years.

Socio-economic status was an important source of confounding which was not successfully eliminated. The children in the non-competitive sample came from homes of substantially higher socio-economic status than the control group. Tables 1 and 2 show how the fathers of children from the non-competitive schools had attained both a higher educational standard and a higher occupational status. This is an important source of confounding because there is an accumulation of evidence to show that children from higher socio-economic backgrounds have lower delinquency rates (Braithwaite, 1976). The higher socio-economic status of the non-competitive sample should cause their delinquency rate to be lower compared to the children from competitive schools.

Table 1—Educational attainment of fathers of students at competitive and non-competitive schools

| | Grade 8 or less % | Grade 9 or 10 % | Grade 11 or 12 % | Some tertiary % | Total % |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Non-competitive schools (n = 108)* | 24 | 23 | 16 | 37 | 100 |
| Competitive schools (n = 319)* | 50 | 25 | 9 | 16 | 100 |
| TOTAL | 44 | 25 | 10 | 21 | 100 |

* Excluding missing cases.

Table 2—Occupation of fathers of students at competitive and non-competitive schools

| | Professional, Managerial % | Clerical and Sales, skilled % | Semi-skilled, unskilled % | Total % |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------|
| Non-competitive schools (n = 124)* | 40 | 35 | 26 | 101 |
| Competitive schools (n = 382)* | 25 | 42 | 33 | 100 |
| TOTAL | 29 | 40 | 31 | 100 |

* Excluding missing cases.

Only children who had been attending their present school for more than 12 months were included in the study.

The Non-Competitive Schools

Four of the five non-competitive schools were what are commonly known as 'community schools' or 'free schools'. School uniforms were absent, teachers were addressed on a first name basis, classes were not compulsory, smoking was not punished, students largely determined their own curriculum, and decisions about school rules were generally made democratically by an assembly of students and staff. These schools were permeated with an ideology of freedom, where students were expected to take responsibility for their own actions. The fifth non-competitive school was a more traditional high school which happened to have rejected the examination system and streaming. There were no school uniforms, and possibly the atmosphere was somewhat less authoritarian than at most high schools, but none of the libertarian features of the free schools were present. At all of the schools students were not prevented from nominating for external examinations if that was their wish, and a number of final year students did so.

The basic problem with the data is therefore that the non-competitiveness of the schools is confounded by their anti-authoritarian nature. Hence, one can never be sure whether any difference from the control group is due to non-competitiveness or anti-authoritarianism.

Results

The percentages of students from non-competitive versus competitive schools admitting to each self-report delinquency item over the previous year are presented in Table 3. There were a number of items for which half, or more than half, of all respondents admitted to delinquent involvement. Activities in this category included drinking (15), petty theft (19), driving without a licence (23), travelling without a ticket (25), shoplifting (32), and defacing

school furniture (35). At the other end of the continuum were offences such as car theft (7), arson (9), theft of something worth more than \$20 (21), and rape (33) to which fewer than 10 per cent of the sample admitted.

For only 7 of the 35 delinquency items is the data trend in the predicted direction, and in no case was this trend statistically significant. On the other hand, for 28 of the 35 items there was a tendency for the boys from the non-competitive schools to report more delinquency than the boys from the competitive schools, and in 12 cases this was statistically significant.

This finding amounts to fairly strong support for the contrary hypothesis that boys from non-competitive schools engage in more law-violating behaviour than their counterparts from competitive schools, especially since the latter sample was of lower socio-economic status, and also of slightly older, boys.

The tendency for the boys from the non-competitive schools to admit to greater delinquency was not limited to any particular type of offence. It ranged from trivial offences such as 'sneaked into the movies or a sports ground without paying' to serious offences such as car or motor-bike theft. Marijuana use was the item for which the difference between the two groups was greatest. At one of the non-competitive schools, 90 per cent of the respondents admitted to marijuana use in the past year, and half of them had used other illegal drugs during that time.

Alternative Interpretations of the Results

The Honesty and Openness Interpretation— Perhaps boys from the non-competitive schools were being more honest and open in responding to the questionnaire. Openness is one of the values inculcated by the free school system. It is possible to examine this interpretation in a very limited way by looking at responses to items 36 and 37 in Table 3. These were designed as 'lie' items. Boys from competitive schools were just as honest as boys from non-

Table 3—Percentage of students at competitive and non-competitive schools admitting to self-report delinquency items

| Item | % admitting | |
|---|---|---------------------------------------|
| | Non-competitive schools (n = 154) % | Competitive schools (n = 422) % |
| 1. . . . have you ever sneaked into the movies or a sports ground without paying? | 41 | 28** |
| 2. . . . have you ever stolen fruit from a shop or orchard? | 26 | 17** |
| 3. . . . have you ever broken windows or street lamps deliberately? | 24 | 16** |
| 4. . . . have you ever taken part in damaging or destroying telephone boxes, road signs or other property? | 28 | 23 |
| 5. . . . have you ever removed things from bicycles, cars or motor cycles to sell or use them? | 20 | 14 |
| 6. . . . have you ever taken a bicycle which was not yours? | 14 | 8** |
| 7. . . . have you ever taken a car or motor bike which was not yours? | 13 | 6** |
| 8. . . . have you ever broken into a building (such as a house, a shed or a shop) and taken something? | 18 | 14 |
| 9. . . . have you ever deliberately lit fires which you knew would damage property? | 9 | 8 |
| 10. . . . have you ever threatened or forced someone to give you money, cigarettes, or something else that did not belong to you? | 25 | 23 |
| 11. . . . have you ever been roused at by a policeman for something you did? | 48 | 33** |
| 12. . . . have you ever been taken to the police station for something you did? | 16 | 9** |
| 13. . . . have the police ever come to see your parents about something you did? | 14 | 11 |
| 14. . . . have you ever been to the Children's Court for something that you did? | 4 | 3 |
| 15. . . . have you ever taken alcohol without your parents knowing? | 59 | 56 |
| 16. . . . do you smoke cigarettes regularly? | 37 | 30 |
| 17. . . . have you tried marijuana or pot? | 36 | 13** |
| 18. . . . have you ever taken other illegal drugs? | 16 | 6** |
| 19. . . . have you ever taken little things (worth less than \$2) that did not belong to you? | 61 | 52 |
| 20. . . . have you ever taken any things of some value (between \$2 and \$20) that did not belong to you? | 21 | 17 |
| 21. . . . have you ever taken any things of large value (worth over \$20) that did not belong to you? | 8 | 6 |
| 22. . . . not counting fights you have had with a brother, have you ever been in a fist fight with another boy? | 41 | 47 |
| 23. . . . have you ever illegally driven a car, motor bike, or motor scooter without a licence? | 60 | 49** |
| 24. . . . have you ever stayed away from school without your parents knowing? | 48 | 44 |
| 25. . . . have you ever deliberately travelled without a ticket or paid the wrong fare? | 63 | 68 |
| 26. . . . have you ever carried a knife in case it was needed in a fight? | 18 | 22 |
| 27. . . . have you ever bought liquor yourself from a pub or bottle department? | 45 | 35** |
| 28. . . . have you ever been to an R film? | 53 | 43 |
| 29. . . . have you ever hit your father or mother? | 13 | 9 |
| 30. . . . have you ever taken part in a fist fight in which a bunch of your friends was against another bunch? | 19 | 21 |
| 31. . . . have you ever used, or threatened to use a knife, stick, or other weapon on someone? | 25 | 20 |
| 32. . . . have you ever taken something from a store without paying for it? | 50 | 40** |
| 33. . . . have you ever forced a girl to have intercourse with you when she did not want to? | 4 | 9 |
| 34. . . . have you ever forced a girl to do any other sexual thing when she did not want to? | 7 | 12 |
| 35. . . . have you ever carved up or written on a school desk or other school furniture? | 60 | 64 |

continued on page 30.

Lie items

| | | |
|---|----|------|
| 36. . . . have you ever told a lie to anyone? | 96 | 98 |
| 37. . . . have you ever done something your parents did not want you to do? | 91 | 83** |

* All items begin with 'In the last year . . . '.

** χ^2 significant at the .05 level.

competitive schools in admitting that in the past year they had 'told a lie'. There was, however, a significant tendency for a larger proportion of the competitive school students to more often deny that in the past year they had ever 'done anything which your parents did not want you to do'. Although the tendency was only barely statistically significant, it does lend some support to the notion that the students from the non-competitive schools were more candid in completing the questionnaire. Future research designs will have to incorporate means of empirically assessing candour which are more thoroughgoing than those included in this exploratory work.

The Reward-Cost Interpretation—Conservative defenders of conventional schooling might gleefully interpret these results as indicating that the competitiveness of traditional schools keeps boys on their toes 'striving ever upward', and that this prevents them from lapsing into delinquency. While this may seem a crude interpretation, it can form the basis of a more sophisticated analysis.

In the competitive school, students are embedded in a milieu which perpetually metes out rewards for appropriate behaviour and punishments for inappropriate behaviour. Within this milieu, students quickly learn the pragmatic benefits of conformity to norms. When students are under the hegemony of a school system which pretends to hold out to them the possibility of great benefits or great costs—in which school performance is the *icon* which holds the key to success in life—students have a lot to lose by getting into trouble with the police. In free schools, trouble with the police may be interpreted by teachers as a harmless, even healthy skirmish with unreasonable authority. Certainly there is no fear for the student that his law breaking will endanger his chances of becoming a prefect, of getting a good reference when he leaves the place, or will result in his being discriminated against as a troublemaker in the allocation of school rewards.

The Competitiveness Confounded by Anti-Authoritarianism Interpretation—It could be that it is their anti-authoritarianism rather than their non-competitiveness which

is at the root of the high delinquency rates of the non-competitive schools. Firm guidance and discipline are lacking in these schools, and it is possible that children are socialised to believe at school that they can misbehave with impunity. As a teacher at one of the non-competitive schools conceded: 'They would be more terrified of doing it [delinquency] in a traditional school'.

The Bottled-Up Rebellion Interpretation—Some supporters of free schools agree with laying the blame for delinquency on their anti-authoritarian approach. They contend that surely it is to be expected that children who have been brought up in a repressive primary school system will go just a little wild when that repression is lifted. If children were educated from the outset in a milieu in which they were responsible for their actions, the problem of letting off steam bottled up by an authoritarian system would not arise.

The Contracultural Interpretation—It is all too rare for positivists, when confronted with data open to multiple interpretations, to return to the subjects of their investigation to see which interpretation they would favour. This was done in the present study. When several groups of students from one of the free schools were confronted with the finding that they engaged in more delinquency than students from traditional schools, they opted for the kind of interpretation which we associate with Marxist criminologists engaged in a critique of capitalist legal order.

'What's wrong with sneaking into the movies without paying anyhow? They're only rip-off merchants.'

'Smoking dope is harmless anyhow.'

In short, these youth who had been radicalised by the iconoclastic education of the free schools, were often inclined to deny the legitimacy of the laws, the breaking of which would harm only 'rip-off merchants'. It is difficult to see, however, why the radical consciousness engendered by the free schools should render their students more inclined to admit the stealing of a car or motor-bike.

The Social Selection Explanation—An explanation of the data in terms of social selection is also possible. Non-competitive

schools may attract children who are more delinquent-prone in as much as they are children who have been unable to cope with the traditional school system. The principal of one of the non-competitive schools, which was an annex to a traditional secondary school, denied that such social selection was a possibility at his school:

'The intake is not selective. Two-thirds of the intake are allocated by ballot to students from the main school and one-third are allocated to students from other schools in the order in which they apply.'

Two of the non-competitive principals were not prepared to hazard a guess as to whether any social selection of delinquent children occurred in their intake. One principal felt that it was a possibility:

'I suppose that kids from pressured situations do end up here. Kids who couldn't cope with the situation they found themselves in there [the other local high school] so decided to make a fresh start here.'

The fifth principal was adamant that such social selection did operate. A psychologist attached to his upper-middle-class school claimed that many of the students at some stage had been to see a psychiatrist:

'Many of them have got into trouble in traditional schools; have had social and emotional difficulties there. Then they have asked to come here.'

Paradoxically though, at the latter school the respondents reported slightly less delinquency than was reported at the other non-competitive schools. And at the first school, for which it was claimed that no delinquent social selection was operating, the delinquency rate was the highest of all eight schools on many items.

Conclusion

Few criminologists would dispute the proposition that school failure has a causal effect upon delinquency. If school failure results in delinquency, then having a school system without failure built into it would seem to be a constructive way of reducing delinquency. Contrary to prediction, however, a somewhat higher level of self-reported delinquency has been found in non-competitive schools when compared to competitive schools.

Whether the more evident delinquency among children from non-competitive schools is to be explained by non-competitiveness, anti-authoritarianism, social selection or greater candour cannot be answered adequately by this kind of exploratory study. A longitudinal study which measures delinquency before intake

and again after several years at the school would be needed to handle the social selection hypothesis. Candour would need to be checked by a larger lie-scale than has been incorporated in this study, and perhaps also by Gold's (1970) techniques of in-depth probing of reported offences and checking honesty against the reports of peers and against police records.

The problem of sorting out whether it is the non-competitiveness or the anti-authoritarianism of such schools which is associated with delinquency is more intractable. Unfortunately, authoritarian non-competitive schools do not commonly occur in the real world.

In short, much needs to be done to build upon the very tentative work in this study. The undoubtedly more complex question of the relationships among school failure, school competitiveness and female delinquency also needs to be explored with a self-report questionnaire explicitly geared to tapping female deviance.

FOOTNOTES

1. This has been unanimously concluded by the following studies: Polk (1965), Polk and Halferty (1966), Schafer and Polk (1967), Rhodes and Reiss (1969), Fisher (1970), Lanphier and Faulkner (1970), Burns (1971), Empey et al. (1971), Kelly (1971), Kelly and Balch (1971), Farrington (1973), Frease (1973), Gold and Mann (1973), Hassall (1974) and Phillips (1974).
2. For a discussion of equality of opportunity programmes see the section entitled 'The Effect of Anti-Poverty Programmes on Crime' in Chapter 12 of the first author's Ph.D. thesis, and see also Chapter 13 of that work.
3. Mizuchi (1964: 127) has reported that middle-class respondents experienced greater stress than lower-class respondents when confronted with limited opportunities to realize their occupational aspirations.

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