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Competitiveness in Schools and Delinquency

Some theories to explain the relationship between school failure and delinquency are examined. It is argued that it is the condition of status deprivation through being given a low rank on the status hierarchy of the school that leads to delinquency. Policies of equality of opportunity achieve a reordering of children on the hierarchy, but leave the hierarchy itself intact. Delinquency may be part of a more general pathology which arises from competitiveness in schools.

Two of the best supported hypotheses in delinquency research are that children who fail at school are likely to become seriously delinquent,¹ and that lower class children have high delinquency rates.² Albert Cohen has built a theory of delinquency around these two propositions.³

Lower class children, says Cohen, fail at school because they are culturally and intellectually deprived, and because the middle class status system of the school is foreign to their lower class socialization. Their failure and humiliation make them so bitter that they react against everything that the school stands for. This reaction formation consists of the adoption of values which are the exact inverse of the middle class values of the school. They exhibit contempt instead of respect for property and authority, immediate impulse gratification instead of impulse control, apathy instead of ambition, toughness instead of control of aggression, and so on. The lower class delinquent's conduct is right by the standards of his subculture precisely because it is wrong by the standards of the school. Cohen sees the delinquent subculture as a solution to the status problem of the lower class youth. Denied status in the respectable society, the delinquent subculture provides him with criteria of status which he can achieve. Many policy makers have inferred from Cohen's theory that an effective way to reduce delinquency is to provide greater educational opportunities for lower class children. For example, many of the equality of opportunity programmes in the

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United States 'War on Poverty' were partly motivated by a desire to reduce crime.

However, such inferences may not be justified. The status system of the school approximates a hierarchy, with all children being given a ranking. But if some children are helped up from the bottom of the hierarchy, their place will still be taken over by other children. Thus educational opportunities for lower class children only achieve a re-ordering of children in the hierarchy. But it is the hierarchy itself, and the condition of being at the bottom of it, which are believed to create delinquency. Equality of opportunity does not change the number of children who end up in that condition. For example, improving educational opportunities for aborigines will not change the fact that someone will come bottom of the class—except that he may be white instead of black. To reduce delinquency schools must be made less competitive, so that no one (black or white) is confronted with the stigma of coming bottom of the class.

Furthermore, rather than reduce delinquency, it may be that equality of opportunity will actually increase it. Stinchcombe found that middle class children who failed at school were greater discipline problems than lower class failures.⁴ Since lower class failures have low expectations for success, the discrepancy between expectations and actual performance is less than for middle class failures. This theory predicts that a reordering of children in the status hierarchy of the school, so that more middle class children end up near the bottom, will increase the overall delinquency rate.

Desirable though equality of opportunity may be on grounds of social justice, it is no solution to delinquency. Efforts at delinquency reduction would be better directed at reducing the competitiveness of schools so that no children are shattered and embittered through coming off worst in the competitive hierarchy. 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 children 'succeed' and none 'fail', since all improve their own past performance.

Schools can function successfully by motivating children to achieve goals of absolute worth rather than by motivating children to do relatively better than other children.⁵ By focusing attention on the competitive system rather than on the goal itself, schools socialize children to uncritically accept the goals which are striven for in the competitive systems of the wider society.

Delinquency should not be the only pathology considered in an analysis of competition in schools. Various behavioural and emotional

problems of adolescence may be related to outright failure at school, worry about the possibility of failure, or not achieving the success either expected or aspired to. For example, a recent survey by the New South Wales Department of Health found a strong association between school failure and smoking.⁶ Perhaps reducing the competitive order of our schools may be as effective an attack on lung cancer as anti-smoking campaigns!

A counter to the above arguments arises in the theorizing of Stinchcombe:

Whenever present activity fails to make sense by being clearly connected to future increments in status, the student tends to become expressively alienated and rebellious. The student who grasps a clear connection between current activity and future status tends to regard school authority as legitimate, and to obey.⁷

If Stinchcombe is right a competitive school system, which is continually comparing performances in order to determine who is most worthy of access to high status occupations, will command greatest conformity. Note however that this is conformity to norms while at school, and does not include conformity to norms when outside of the school grounds.

Assuming that Stinchcombe's hypothesis is correct, and assuming that it is acceptable to base the legitimacy of the school's authority on power over the future of its students, conformity can be achieved without continually confronting poor students with their failure. Surely competitive tests need only be sufficiently regular to ensure reasonably accurate measurement of performance for employment purposes, and results of such tests need not be made public knowledge. Moreover, Stinchcombe's hypothesis can be no justification for a competitive primary school system. Primary school results bear no relation to future increments in status except in so far as they indicate the likelihood of good secondary school performance. This is just as true for ipsative results as it is for competitive results.

Finally, the competitive system in schools may well reinforce competitiveness in the personalities of its students. These competitive personalities go out into the wider society, and thus competitive arrangements in the wider society are perpetuated. In the same way that juvenile delinquency is generated by failure in the school's competitive system, so is adult crime generated by failure in the competitive system of the wider society.⁸ Other forms of social pathology such as suicide,⁹ alcoholism,¹⁰ dangerous driving,¹¹ and mental illness¹² are associated with failure in the competitive system of the wider society. Moreover, much social pathology, while not associated with failure in the competitive system, is associated with the pressure of keeping up in the

competitive system. Witness the classic case of the successful businessman plagued by an ulcer.

If the school is the mouse race that prepares us for the rat race, then a solution to the social pathology of the rat race may lie within the school.

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