Dropping out: a maladjusted reaction to maladjustment in school

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If we have not lost touch with reality, «a sure sign of good mental health», we are aware that dropping out of school has become a very serious problem. We are up against a problem whose scope and severity are unprecedented. When we want to do something about it, we must take enough time to ask ourselves, where shall we act, with whom, in which area should we intervene? I must say I myself have not found many answers to these questions in the current literature.

In some cases, it is stated without hesitation or reservation that young people are responsible for their problems and all the problems they represent for adults. All they need is more discipline, they need to be trained and put in their place. In other cases, their parents are blamed for all the ills and held responsible for all the problems experienced by youth today: lack of motivation, lack of discipline, rudeness and, with time, absenteeism, repeated failure at school, dropping out of course, vandalism, drugs, prostitution, crime, etc. Poor parents! Especially if we ourselves are parents. Who has seriously tried to help them trust themselves more, to help them feel competent and create stronger ties of solidarity among themselves, to help them become more involved in their children's education and take an active part in school life?

Not much is written about school itself except to say it is victimized by young people's antisocial behaviour, by parents' almost complete lack of cooperation. That is why, it is often said, teachers are finding their profession increasingly difficult and their enthusiasm is at a low ebb.

This is generally what we hear most often in connection with dropping out. It is an unfair, incomplete characterization that gives very little indication of what ought to be done. This is a phenomenon we must really try to understand, not out of intellectual curiosity, not out of an ulterior concern to hold on to clients, but out of a profound sense of professional and social responsibility.

From this vantage point, I will first discuss adolescents we call drop-outs and potential drop-outs, but I will do so in quite an unconventional manner. Second, I will consider the institutional genesis of the problem. In other words, I will analyze how and to what extent the school brings upon itself the ills it complains of, particularly lack of motivation and violence. I will then suggest that the school as a living environment is the genuinely appropriate answer to both youths' and adults' needs. Following that, I will present an alternative solution: to make dropping out an educational experience instead of working so desperately to avoid it or urging young people to go back to school at all costs when they do not really feel it is important to do so.

The drop-out

First we must stop thinking that school failure is the main reason for dropping out. In most of the cases we evaluated, school failure was frequent but not systematic; however, it was the first sign of a mental kind of dropping out, that is, a deep-seated loss of interest that had been manifested for a long time. I will not discuss here the many studies on the characteristics of drop-outs as you can find them in other articles.

A number of authors present an image of drop-outs seen from outside, an image many of the media continue to buy into. Others took care to approach their subjects directly and asked them why they had left school. Without blaming the school for their decision, drop-outs made some very clear-sighted criticisms. They argued school was not a place that concerned itself with developing their self-reliance, their sense of responsibility or their critical abilities. They complained in particular about poor interpersonal relationships; this was their greatest source of dissatisfaction. Their second major complaint was teaching curricula they judged to be artificial because the content had nothing to do with their lives as adolescents.

In other words, it is school the young people question. Before attaching too much importance to their criticisms, however, we should probably ask whether students who do not drop out share their views. Many researchers have worked on this subject. Cope and Hannah (1975), for example, found that, compared with other students described as "persistent," drop-outs were more self-reliant, more in touch with their own feelings and capable of greater open-mindedness and a more complex view of things. Drop-outs were, not surprisingly, less conformist, more capable of departing from rules and social standards that are taken for granted (Coulombe, 1981). Even in the family, the panorama is less grim than claimed, as shown by studies done in Quebec (Boucher and Morose, 1978) and in France (ARCOS, 1979). The research showed a large number of drop-outs were attached to their family and considered the family an important social institution. Moreover, most of them lived in homes where the atmosphere was good, where communication existed and where the youths shared their parents' values very closely. In academic terms, the drop-outs had expectations that did not differ substantially from those of their "persistent" classmates. They wanted the kind of school where they would learn things that were important to them, where they would learn to think for themselves and where they would be allowed to question ideas taught in the classroom (Boucher and Morose, 1978; Larouche, 1976).

More than other researchers, Fine and Rosenberg (1983) were against the all too widely held belief that drop-outs were maladjusted, inept, "deviants." In these authors' opinion, they were above all “resistant”, they had developed a keen awareness of contradictions that existed between the school as an institution, on the one hand, and youths' personal experience and needs, on the other. The young people criticized the school's hidden agenda and its "meritocratic" ideology. If they perceived something as unfair, they reacted strongly and were willing to defy authority. These characteristics found in drop-outs were seen by Fine and Rosenberg not as shortcomings or deficiencies but as healthy reactions, as strength to resist a problem situation.

We now realize there are different categories of drop-outs. Although many drop-outs are socially and emotionally maladjusted, others leave school due to an obvious lack of interest in abstract studies. Still others flatly reject school because of its ideology, how it is organized, its stifling, aberrant structures (Reich and Young, 1975; Erpicum and Murray, 1975; Larouche, 1976; ARCOS, 1979).

Institutional genesis

As I have already mentioned, when we listen to young people, they speak with ease about their dissatisfaction with school. Only 28% say they truly appreciate their school experience (Reich and Young, 1975). Of those who stay in school, the great majority see school as a necessary evil, a price to pay for a diploma and a job. They do not agree with the values advocated by the school and

almost all of them have toyed with the idea of dropping out. Many are almost sure to do it if they do not receive extra help from school staff or their family. These are what we call potential drop-outs, who, in Quebec, can be detected one year or more before the fact thanks to screening tests. However, I know of few schools that take the logical, effective measures called for after the screening, especially when appropriate intervention means changing certain things about the very institution.

We just saw that most adolescents are openly critical of their school, how it is run, its values, its artificial nature, "disconnected from real life." More than half stay in school because, for one thing, attending school is compulsory by law and, for another, getting a job generally requires a diploma, over which the school holds an *absolute monopoly*. Finally, and this appears to be the main reason, school is still the place where they feel least lonely, where it is easiest to make friends and acquaintances.

We could of course flatly dismiss young people's criticisms of school and believe, as many others do, that adolescents, especially "maladjusted" ones, are not in a position to know what is good for them or what the work world will demand of them. School, it is often stated, should teach them, as soon as possible, a sense of discipline and effort, and make them see that the days of the "pleasure principle" are over.

We could, however, consider that adolescents are right in some respects and proceed to analyze as objectively as possible all the school's ills, which we are, after all, the first to acknowledge. Let us look more closely at two of these problems: first, dropping out coupled with lack of motivation and, second, violence.

Dropping out and lack of motivation

Dropping out is far from being a phenomenon among a few youths who are maladjusted or come from disadvantaged families, that is, as we have just seen, an individual problem. It should be recognized as *an institutional problem, a problem for which school is in large measure responsible*.

Like the young people, we should acknowledge that school is not concerned primarily with youths' basic needs as developing individuals, as people searching for their personal, occupational and social identity and, I might add, as people searching for the meaning of life, their life. The principal of a school - the prime contractor, so to speak - must acknowledge his/her main responsibility and real power in this respect.

Young people's second criticism of school is the unsuitable nature of teaching curricula in relation to their lives. In this case, lack of motivation comes to the fore - a massive problem present in close to 80% of students.

Students do not complain most about the difficulty of school work or the effort they have to make. They simply cannot understand why they are forced to learn things that mean nothing to them. Is it really necessary to master such content or is it enough to have heard about it once and, above all, to have obtained a good mark. After all, in the current system the mark is what counts, not the knowledge itself, let alone the integration and transfer of learning and whether it endures.

Let us face the fact that a large amount of the material will be useful to a minority of students only. They are forced to memorize concepts, rules and formulas that just about every adult, in the school system or elsewhere, has forgotten. How many high school teachers would do well on exams set by their colleagues? Is the point just to open doors for the students later on? And what purpose will these open doors serve if the youths lose even the wish to move ahead or if the doors soon carry new requisites? Is this the only way we have found to expand young people's culture: by making them forget as many things as possible? Will we be much further ahead if all that is left is distrust of a culture we have presented to them in disconnected bits, in a disembodied fashion? (An interesting work on the specific phenomenon of the loss of culture among young people is P.É. Roy's *Une révolution avortée* [1991], with an excellent preface by Pierre Vadeboncoeur. This analysis is reminiscent of Allan Bloom's in *L'âme désarmée*?? [1987], which addresses the problem mainly in universities.)

Although I am in direct contact with adolescents and I have been going to schools for years, I still do not understand the attitude of schools. Schools continue to ignore systematically all youths' interests, all their questions, all their increasingly pressing needs. Yet this would be fertile ground for enthusiastic, fruitful and instructive learning. Schools persist in keeping students' noses to the grindstone of drab, insipid curricula. I am not in the least proposing facile solutions, nor are the students for that matter. Students must learn more at school, but above all they must stop losing their thirst for learning, their self-confidence and their hopes for the future.

Given the generalized problem of lack of motivation, the poverty of our creative imagination is disconcerting. Most schools are still looking for artificial gadgets, conditioning techniques and competitions - when they are not simply using disciplinary measures (reward, punishment, suspension, etc.) and excess threats, undue pressure, stress and unbridled competition.

Violence in school

These considerations lead me to say a few words about violence in school. Many people are worried about the rise of this phenomenon. The violence is directed not only against people but against objects and the school itself. The cost of vandalism for a single school board in Greater Montreal recently amounted to close to two million dollars a year. To be sure, violence is not confined to schools and is in fact a societal problem. However, again we would be behaving like ostriches if we denied school's contribution to the phenomena of violence and vandalism. Whenever people experience deep frustration of their basic needs, whenever they live in circumstances where they do not have sufficient living space, both physical and psychological, manifestations of violence are common. This is observed as clearly in animals as in human beings.

We have discussed young people's frustration regarding poor interpersonal relationships at school and the artificial and insipid nature of curricula. To this we must add the tension and stress of tests and exams to which they are constantly submitted --and most of which measure short-term memory more than the integration of knowledge and acquisition of good thinking and reasoning skills.

What is especially detrimental and irritating about the continuous evaluations is not so much the evaluation process itself - which could serve an important instructive purpose for teacher and student alike - but the manner in which the evaluations are used. Teachers often resort to them as punishment and to bolster their power and hold over the students. In some cases, students are

paying for their teachers' competition with colleagues or with other schools. However, the most anxiety-provoking and unfair characteristic of evaluations is their long-term consequences. Each time, students (and very often their parents, for no useful purpose) are made to feel that their academic and occupational future are at stake. The fear of failure, wittingly fanned by the school, is one of the main causes of the violence and vandalism the school complains of.

The same applies to educational counselling and vocational guidance. In actual fact, despite the more or less scientific trappings of these activities, they are more often than not an inescapable process of selection-elimination. Such guidance does not help adolescents to learn more about themselves or to face their personal, occupational and social future. Often it is merely a mechanical classification operation designed to set a minority of students on the main line to privilege and shunt the vast majority onto the siding.

Thus young people's different forms of intelligence and real talents are held in contempt because the school does not know how to recognize or develop them. This is antidemocratic, a way of denying individual and group differences, and to salve the conscience there is the saying, "There isn't room for everyone at the top of the ladder." But does school have to be a ladder?

A maladjusted reaction to maladjustment in school

I consider dropping out a maladjusted reaction to maladjustment in school. When young people leave school believing, and having others believe, it was entirely their doing, they are adopting an attitude of weakness and lack of responsibility. They do not say what school principals and educators should hear and they do not take on their collective and social responsibility to help solve their own problems.

In this spirit we conducted an action research project in Quebec. The purpose was to make potential drop-outs into important resource persons in solving and preventing the problem of dropping out. Although the young people were willing to join in the effort to improve the quality of life at school, we did not succeed in bringing around the staff to consider the youths in a positive light and establish a real dialogue with them.

School as a living environment

It has been said that change is a *process of creative destruction*. After making or recalling some major criticisms of school as an institution, I must now propose an exciting project: that of making schools into real, genuine living environments.

People who think the criticisms made above are extreme will no doubt find my project unrealistic and utopian. If they do not feel any responsibility for the problems in schools, they will be incapable of envisaging or making the necessary changes. These are ardent defenders of the status quo, people for whom realism and practicality are confined to the status quo, as if change were not also a reality.

Among people who think differently, I would like to revive hope and dynamism. To them I want to say, particularly on behalf of all those working in pilot projects and alternative schools, that change is possible in education when those who believe in it take responsibility for effecting it.

The expression "living environment" has become so hackneyed that more often than not it merely saddens the wistful and brings a smirk to cynics' lips.

To me a living environment is essentially a natural environment, a place where people have real experiences, an environment where life is respected and living is healthy. Consequently, a school as a living environment is a school where human beings' basic needs of health and growth are respected.

At school people need to be themselves and not just play roles. They need to feel that they are respected, appreciated and trusted; that their self-reliance, initiative and sense of responsibility are being encouraged; and thus their right to make mistakes is recognized. It is not only the students who have these needs; the adults working in schools have them also. They too need respect, esteem, trust. They need to feel that at school they are still undergoing a process of self-actualization and growth, and not heading toward exhaustion and burnout. School will never be a living environment for the young people if it cannot be one for the adults working there. Similarly, individual differences between the youths cannot be respected if they are not respected in the adults. If, in addition, such differences become sources of tension and conflict rather than sources of exchange and complementarity, the outcome will be the same. The students need these differences among the teachers because they want real adults who can relate to them genuinely, not standardized, homogenized, bland robots who are defined and programmed by rules, regulations and collective agreements.

The school as a living environment bears in mind that before being students, youngsters are people, and that before being teachers, adults are also people, alive and growing and, as much as possible, healthy.

As for those who subscribe to the status quo, who say this is too good to be true and do not dare believe in it just in case, my opinion is that their dreams and enthusiasm were snatched from them. They were blinded to make them toe the line better. For the sake of their mental health, I would like them to become aware of this and also aware of their choice when they refuse to work to reform schools and education, a task that has become more necessary and urgent than ever.

How to make dropping out an educational experience

At the risk of upsetting some readers, let me say right away that the problem of dropping out in itself is not that serious. What is especially serious is that we still have not managed to make dropping out an educational experience. It is essential to offer various educational resources to all youngsters who leave school (some at request of the school). This is a question of ethics and responsibility for the school board. Here are a few examples of these services:

1) Individual help that the school offers students (psychology, social service, religious counsel and particularly academic and vocational guidance) should continue to be accessible to drop-outs. The service providers must begin to intervene from the time students are identified as potential drop-outs. They should also speak to all students in grades eight and nine about dropping out and about the personal and institutional factors that cause it. If we take this kind of action to prevent suicide, why should we not take it in the case of dropping out, which affects close to 40% of students?

What is more, when students leave school or stop attending it, someone from these services should take the initiative to contact them and ask to meet with them, either at school or (why not?) at the young person's home. Since the school is part of the problem, why should it not also be part of the solution?

2) Insofar as possible, what youngsters do when they drop out must be supervised. They should be helped if they are looking for work or already have a job, if they are taking part in social or community activities, or in organized recreational activities. A high school in the Laurentians has given credits to youths who are working. This is an excellent way of making dropping out an educational experience and of fostering the important process of maturing from the personal, social and vocational points of view.

3) The parents of drop-outs must be helped. The school should offer to organize meetings of parents and staff and should encourage group discussions to create support and self-help networks among parents. Helping the parents will have a very positive effect on the drop-outs if the parents do not dramatize the situation so much and help their children plan their lives and work, and if they as parents take more responsibility. Threats and punitive measures alone solve nothing. What is most important is to help youngsters to analyze why they left school, to evaluate the different options open to them, to make and stick by decisions they think are the most worthwhile. In this process, the young person will learn things of the utmost importance that he/she may not have learned otherwise and that may greatly facilitate his/her going back to school and doing well.

In addition to these direct and indirect services for drop-outs, the school should of course carry out a detailed analysis of the phenomenon itself, as we discussed earlier, since we are not talking about a handful of maladjusted or marginal individuals but tens of thousands of youths.

Conclusion

I will say a few words about the responsibility of school principals in bringing about changes in education and in instituting the school as a living environment. First of all, I think it is indispensable for every school to devise a true educational blueprint that is defined, managed and evaluated by the community, a blueprint that serves above all to promote that community. To achieve this, however, the philosophy and values underlying the educational blueprint must be embodied in the principal, who must be dynamic and show clear leadership. The experience of pilot projects and of alternative and community schools shows forcefully that a school principal must help the community of teachers, students and parents to conceive of a blueprint that is ideologically consistent. Intense and continuous group discussion and mobilization are needed to accomplish this, because getting adults to put aside their individualism, their competitive spirit and their feelings of insecurity is not always a painless task. The aim is to have teachers, parents and students pool their efforts in managing their own collective blueprint.

I believe that until professionals in education take an individual and collective stand on curricula and teaching approaches, until they decide to return to their primary mission of educating and the top priority of the educational relationship, it is just as well if the problem of dropping out is not solved too quickly. One urgent, priority message has to be assimilated first: a generalized malaise permeates schools and society, a malaise experienced by adults and young people alike. Both young and old must work on solving this ill to learn better and to live better.

In this sense, the phenomenon of dropping out is an excellent starting point, an excellent educational material; it is up to us to use it wisely.

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