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Where are We Going?

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WHERE ARE WE GOING?

A Special Studies Paper

Presented to

Mr. Ford

by

Tricia Weeks

December 18, 1970

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

At the opening of a press conference on August 1, 1963, John F. Kennedy made the statement:

A boy or girl has only a limited time in their life in which to get an education and yet it will shape their whole lives and the lives of their children.

Today's society requires more improved skills and more advanced education in order to succeed as a member of the society and as an individual. The problem of providing education and specialized skills belongs to the nation's schools. Many students, however, find the struggle for an education too difficult and resolve that immediate problem by dropping out of school. Dropping out indicates the student's unwillingness or incapacity to absorb society's more refined tools and knowledge. From this point on, the climb out of the lower socio-economic class is relatively impossible.

The term "dropout" generally refers to pupils who leave school before earning a high school diploma. There can be no simple type-casting of all dropouts to distinguish them from those who finish school. The act of leaving school is the result of varied personal and social conditions. Such factors as average income, rental rates,

teacher's salaries, the amount of schooling completed by the adult citizenry, the proportion of professionals in the community, and per capita state expenditure have a positive relationship while overcrowdedness in dwelling units and pupil and teacher turnover are negatively related.

To the native white American youth, born on the right side of the tracks and raised in a tradition of self-reliance and self-advancement, school is a place where the indoctrination of the home is reinforced. If his educational goals are practical and materialistic, he will probably regard school as a prerequisite to receiving a certificate that helps to open the right doors in the right places. If his aim is an encounter with the world of ideas, a diploma symbolizes mastery of prerequisites to higher learning and professional work. A diploma becomes a standard for membership into the middle class.

In the low socio-economic classes, especially among certain ethnic and color-caste populations, the dropout problem is far more serious. Because of the ghetto background, these groups are unable to fit school into their crisis-filled lives. Subsistence needs are so desperate that the young must grow up quickly and contribute something to the family's income. Mere survival each day requires commitment of all resources available. Education is a form of investment in the future, but the idea of investment is meaningless in a hand-to-mouth existence.

The attitude of the family toward school is also involved in the student's decision to drop out. In recent studies it was found that two-thirds of the parents of dropouts held negative or indifferent attitudes toward the value of education. They failed to see a relationship between a high school education and later adjustment or success. On the other hand, most of the parents of students who remain in school felt a high school diploma was essential for success in life.

Some of the major factors confronting the school in relation to the dropout problem are reading deficiency, negative self image and family attitudes. If one views the educational system as the process whereby a youth is helped to achieve meaningful success in his environment and to become an intelligent, productive, responsive citizen in this society, then the problem of school dropouts becomes even more serious.

Those students who choose not to operate within the educational system lack not only the intellectual skills, but also the emotional security needed for school success. Because the slower student is many times ignored and sometimes resented in the classroom, he does not develop the self-confidence that must be present before self actualization can take place. The student must be motivated by the acceptance and recognition of others before he can feel the need to actualize his potentials.

A number of programs have been instituted to help the culturally disadvantaged to develop positive attitudes toward himself and toward the educational system. Among these are early childhood programs like Head Start and adult education programs. Such programs have met with public criticism, but they are steps in the direction of helping the dropout adjust to society and giving culturally disadvantaged children an opportunity improve their self concept and increase the likelihood of their success in the educational process.

Although many programs have been instituted in the direction of helping those who dropout, the attitude of the classroom teacher is of extreme importance to the student. An attitude of indifference or resentment on the part of a teacher can destroy the student's self image. On the other hand, a concern expressed by the teacher for a student's experience, can be of extreme benefit in keeping the potential dropout in school.

When asked which direction to take, the Chelsea Cat told Alice that it all depends on where one wants to go. The responsibility of the classroom teacher to the individual and to the future of the society is tremendous. By taking part in the educational process, the classroom teacher becomes a participant in the molding of the future. Therefore, most of the responsibility for the prevention of school dropouts must go to the classroom teacher.

Teachers come in many sizes and shapes--
large, small, young, old, tired, fresh,
black, white, rich, poor
Some are kind, and some are not.

Some teachers are great. Like I said, I
had two like that.
They put bandages on my hurts--on my heart,
on my mind, on my spirit.
Those teachers cared about me and let me
know it.
They gave me wings.¹

¹Marian Franklin, "Thoughts of a Dropout Recorded by
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