The Closed Compulsory Community of American High Schools

James S. Coleman has written a peculiar book at once filled with considerable insight and almost glib oversimplification. According to a statement on the dust jacket, **Adolescents and the Schools** (Basic Books, New York, 1965. 135 pp., $4.50) is an attempt to develop ". . . a philosophy of secondary education in greater accord with the world in which we live." Actually the book is nothing of the sort. It consists of some reasonably perceptive observations that can help one to understand certain parts of secondary education.

The argument may be briefly stated. Modern, American, middle-class adolescents live in a society in which most actions that demand responsibility are denied to them. Their economic needs are met, they need not, indeed they cannot work around the home, nor are they responsible for anyone. Secondary schools which ought to rectify this lack of experience are unfitted to do so, partly because of the ways in which they have evolved. At the turn of the present century, secondary schools were primarily college preparatory schools available to a limited number of the age group. Teachers were oriented toward the subject that students would study in college. Then there was a change, and high school became the common experience for a large proportion of teen-age population, many of whom would not attend college. And with this change came a change in curriculum and a change in teaching style. Presently, however, college preparation has again come to preoccupy secondary schools, but with complications. High schools have become the total community of adolescents, and the situation is intensified by the fact that the schools represent a compulsory experience.

But secondary schools do differ from each other. In some, academic values are stressed, while in other schools they are not. Some are richly endowed, and some are not. In some, exceptional teaching goes on, while in others the teachers are custodians. The significant point is that these differences do not correspond to the factors that logically ought to be determining. For example, a well-supported high school that sends most of its graduates on to college seems to have less regard for academic values than a small rural high school. In relatively advantaged high schools, football, popularity, good looks, and having a good time are judged more important by students than good grades and academic achievement. Athletics in particular seem important because they represent community achievement for the only community the adolescents know.

In some respects such a closed community might seem to be the ideal device for teaching the young to cope with secondary and tertiary relationships with people. It has many of the attributes of a simple society, but with a difference. It is a compulsory closed society that coexists with the world of adolescents outside of school, a society in which, given the general affluence, they are free to do as they will, buy what they wish, and use time as they think best—all without being responsible to anyone. In the face of such competition the school is at a serious disadvantage in its attempts to capture the students' interest.

Somehow high schools must blend the characteristics of an open society with some elements of demand for responsible behavior. Students must be free to carry out actions and to make mistakes. The environment must be structured so that they can experience the congruences of their mistakes. But actions must be small and inconsequential so that consequences are not too severe. The environment must provide obstacles which, when overcome, will produce learning. Typically, high schools have not been thus organized.

When Coleman talks of the school in a social setting, when he examines such experiments as that of Summerhill, and when he generalizes from his own studies of ten high schools, one has the feeling that he is on solid ground. But when he enters the quagmire of educational economics, one has the conviction that Coleman has embraced only one part of the contemporary economic wisdom and that his presuppositions can be seriously challenged. For example, his predictions about the slow increase in jobs as compared with the increase in young people available for jobs have thus far not been realized. Nor have his fears about the effect on the job market of automation. One also wonders whether his notion that students stay on in school for a Master's degree because the Master's provides additional training required by the labor market is warranted by the evidence. There is the general counterargument that tax cuts and the general productivity of the economy are creating more jobs each year and that such things as the war on poverty will eventually train even people from the least advantaged levels to take such jobs. In a word, the chapter on the economy and secondary education is of the "running scared" school.

As to his prescription that the young need to learn to assume responsibility, there can but be general approval. And hopefully the school might develop techniques to accomplish this.

Unfortunately, Coleman is a little vague on the ways his ideas might be put into operation.

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Biochemistry

The Amino Sugars. The chemistry and biology of compounds containing amino sugars. vol. 2A, *Distribution and Biological Role.* Endre A. Balazs and Roger W. Jeanloz, Eds. Academic Press, New York, 1965. xxviii + 591 pp. Illus. $22.

Distribution and Biological Role, volume 2A of *The Amino Sugars,* represents the first published part of a projected four-volume treatise on amino-sugar-containing compounds. It is subdivided into 20 chapters that differ widely in scope and in quality; 19 authors contributed to this volume which, according to the editors, represents a "systematic review which includes all living systems, organized ac-