Letters

Reducing Educational Pressures

As an educator who has worked with youth both in elementary and secondary schools, I have been interested in the discussion of academic pressures which followed upon Abelson's editorial, "Excessive educational pressures" (12 May, p. 741). First of all, few people can adequately define pressure in terms which embrace all youth. Although we commonly think of pressure as being entirely negative, that pressure (or drive, or need, or value orientation that motivates) to achieve can be favorable if it results in an action that has hope of a satisfying culmination. But when pressure cannot be translated into positive action, it results in frustration and anxiety. The homework assignment that requires 2 hours of diligent concentration may be an undesirable force for one child and a positive force for another. Furthermore, a day or a week hence, the same assignment may elicit reverse pressure on the two youths. What constitutes a pressure for one child does not necessarily constitute a pressure for another. Furthermore, not all pressures are universally evil —some youths thrive upon pressure.

One should point out that pressure can come from external and internal sources. The school, the teacher, and the parent have a degree of control over a portion of the external causes of pressure. They can regulate the curriculum or the assignment or the social obligations if they wish. Internal pressures, however, are more deep-rooted and cannot be allayed as easily. How a child perceives a given situation, based upon his own set of values and experiences, is generally controlled by the individual alone. The degree to which he displays psychic tension prior to taking college board examinations is embedded in the individual and cannot be readily dissipated by outsiders. In short, perhaps adults can do something about some of the pressures facing youth, but we must realize that we cannot mitigate all of them. During the past 4 years I have been director of a high school which was deeply concerned about pressure on youth. The faculty undertook to reduce what it believed to be negative pressures.

First, the schedule was changed from the traditional eight periods of 55 minutes to three 110-minute periods daily. Students meet with teachers on alternate days and once each week all classes meet—an English class might meet on Monday for one 55-minute period and on Wednesday and Friday for double periods of 110 minutes. Furthermore, faculty are compelled to provide a "break" sometime during each session to lessen the possible strain of sitting for a 2-hour lecture. This unconventional schedule has elicited very positive reaction from students, parents, and teachers. Within the schedule, students are able to carry more courses with no deleterious effect on either their tested achievement or grade-point averages. Longer class periods for discussion and supervised study, less frequent assignments, and greater variety of presentation increased the students' confidence in their ability to perform well.

Second, the athletic program was altered. A new coaching staff was recruited of men who were more interested in the general welfare of the student than in winning records. (These men have been known to bench a player who was not doing his best in the academic program.) Also, the number and frequency of athletic contests was reduced to eliminate undue tension buildup among both the participants and the observers. Athletes were not permitted to participate in more than one sport during a given season—a common occurrence in small schools. The reduced emphasis on athletics seems to have produced a more relaxed athlete, yet resulted in a program which now encompasses 75 percent of the males and produced winning teams in every sport.

A third approach to relieving pressure was through a philosophy called Idea—Interdisciplinary Education Approach. In essence this is merely a fusion of like subjects which are taught by a team of teachers. American literature, American history, American art, and American music are fused into a course called American studies which meets 2 hours daily. Several other common areas were similarly combined and the Chemical Education Material Study, the Physical Science Study Committee, and math programs are scheduled for fusion in the fall and will provide R & D in the industrial arts, thus serving as a practical application of these combined studies. Such combined programming has reduced the need for students to pull together isolated threads of knowledge and enabled them to see the broader aspect of the educational picture. It is also hoped that the combined modern sciences will allow the instructors to use their ingenuity and creativity and the students to apply their own innovative talents to practical problems. Thus the student will no longer see biology, chemistry, physics, or mathematics in isolation but in a harmoniously woven program.

I believe that the institution of a few external alterations in the school's overall program has resulted in a more relaxed and better prepared student. To support this, a marked change has occurred in the level of students' anxieties. The data obtained from the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale between 1963 and the present indicates a reduction in the anxiety level of students from a frighteningly high mean score of 33.2 to a comfortable 15.9. Furthermore, these changes may have been responsible for less vandalism among students, less truancy, and less internal strife among cliques, all of which cannot be substantiated statistically but have been observed by the faculty and administration of the school. It is my feeling that when parents, teachers, and students can work together as a group to allay what they feel are necessary pressures on youth, much can be done to remove the negative external stimuli on students.

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