

ABSTRACT

A review of various attempts to explain the causes of student misbehavior and escalating school discipline problems suggests that there has been a steady process of depersonalizing the blame for individual misconduct. The misbehaving student no longer seems to be held responsible for his actions. Various factors, including family background, peer group influence, poor teaching, the school system, and society-in-general, are blamed for disobedience and disrespect. The author finds the decreasing emphasis on individual responsibility a disturbing development, one that threatens to create a society of victims.

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### **Student Behavior, the Depersonalization of Blame, and the Society of Victims**

Finding someone or something to blame for social problems has emerged as a fulltime occupation, it would seem, for a host of social scientists, journalists, clerics, and politicians. In a different era such activity might have been called scapegoating or buck-passing, but today it is dignified by labels like "the determination of causation" and "the investigation of environmental influences." Political, economic, and social considerations make the matter complex. For example, accounting for the origins of social problems can be potentially rewarding for some groups and damaging for others. While scientific attempts to explain phenomena rarely are designed intentionally to vindicate (at least, that is what the public is led to believe), it is true that certain interest groups do support research and researchers that can demonstrate their own innocence or the culpability of others. The political poll is a classic example. Teachers organizations like to "prove" that declining student achievement is not attributable to low quality instruction. Oil companies like to use statistics to demonstrate that high profits are not the result of price-fixing or other monopolistic practices. The politics of apology, as I refer to it, is big business. A by-product of this enterprise is a process called the depersonalization of blame.

The thesis of this paper is that the recent history of research in the social sciences has witnessed the unrelenting depersonalization of blame. No longer do scholars hold an individual responsible for his triumphs or his transgressions. What an individual does becomes the product of various external factors. At the risk of anticipating my conclusion for a moment, I would like to question whether shifting responsibility for personal behavior from the individual to external factors (the process of depersonalization) is ultimately in the best interests of society or the individual. Particularly where inappropriate or anti-social behavior is concerned, the depersonalization of blame appears to exonerate misbehaving individuals of any responsibility for their actions. The looter is excused because of his impoverished background. The unproductive assembly-line worker draws sympathy because of the tedium of his occupation. Everyone becomes a victim of forces outside of himself. The question arises, "Can a society of victims survive?"

The following discussion does not address directly this perplexing question. Instead, it concentrates on the process by which the blame for school discipline problems has been shifted from individual students to other factors. School discipline problems have not lured researchers as much as several related subjects like school drop-outs, juvenile delinquency, and adolescent drug-use. Still, much has been written on student misbehavior and schools' efforts to deal with it.

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It is likely that how students behave in school long has been a prime concern for educators and laymen alike, but I doubt if past attention equals that devoted to the matter today. In the 1975 "Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes Toward Education," as in other recent years, the public's number one school concern is "lack of discipline."<sup>1</sup> Of related interest are "use of drugs" (6th) and "crime/vandalism/stealing" (8th). More than busing, budgets, and plummeting test scores, Americans seem to be worried about student behavior.

A special report by *U.S. News & World Report* presents a series of sobering statistics about crime in schools — among them the fact that assaults on teachers have risen 77% and assaults on students have increased 85% between 1970 and 1973.<sup>2</sup> In a 1971 study of teachers' concerns, the National Education Association's Research Division finds that over 21% of the teachers sampled viewed classroom management and discipline as a "major problem."<sup>3</sup> The figure represents a 6% jump over 1968, and anyone keeping abreast of the literature on school discipline since 1971 would not hesitate to predict the percentage will continue to climb. Educators regrettably report that discipline problems are even becoming more prevalent in lower grades. These and other indicators leave little doubt that the behavior of American students constitutes a serious national problem

### *Who or What Is to Blame?*

Once upon a time in American education it appears that individual students were held accountable for their behavior in school. The authors of a popular textbook on school discipline write,<sup>4</sup>

The Colonial schoolmaster was not too troubled with the causes of misbehavior. He had been taught that there was only one real cause — the presence of Satan in the child . . . . Later and more moderate interpretations were that there was a good deal of "natural mischief" in any child, particularly a boy, and a practical approach to discipline in school need not concern itself too much with the *why* of misbehavior.

It is difficult to isolate a precise date when educators began to be concerned with why students misbehaved as they were with how to correct the misbehavior. Some note that Freud's attack on the psychology of men like William James gave rise to the notion that an individual's behavior was "rooted in the past and in the unconscious."<sup>5</sup> More to the point, Gordon Allport concludes that twentieth century psychological theories stress the ways in which "men respond reactively to external stimuli" and ignore "man's proactive, self-directing capacities."<sup>6</sup>

In the last half century two movements in particular have abetted the politics of apology and the depersonalization of blame. Behaviorism, one of the theories to which Allport alludes, demonstrated for many persons that human beings were shaped by stimuli in their environment rather than their own self-determination. Alongside behaviorism came the "prevention movement," which pushed concern

<sup>1</sup>George H. Gallup, "Seventh Annual Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes Toward Education," *Phi Delta Kappan* (December 1975): 228.

<sup>2</sup>"Terror in Schools," *U.S. News & World Report* (January 26, 1976): 52.

<sup>3</sup>"Major Problems of Teachers," *NEA Research Bulletin* 49 (December 1971): 103.

<sup>4</sup>Knute G. Larson and Melvin R. Karpas, *Effective Secondary School Discipline* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup>Sara K. Winter, Jeffery C. Griffith, and David A. Kolb, "Capacity for Self-Direction," in *Learning in Social Settings*, ed. Matthew W. Mills and W.W. Charters, Jr. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1970), p. 458.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

with curing existent problems to the back burner in an effort to get at the "root causes" of physiological, psychological, and social problems. Presumably knowledge of "root causes" would lead to the elimination of the factors that gave rise to the problem in the first place.

On the surface, those who press for prevention seem to enjoy a logically unchallengeable position. Unfortunately for the individuals charged with implementing preventive programs, consensus regarding the "root causes" of problems such as crime, economic disadvantage, and poor school performance is elusive. Writing about crime in society and in schools, James Q. Wilson notes that scholars have identified "the structure of the family, peer group relationships, and poverty as factors contributing to many problems in our society including crime generally and particularly crime in schools."<sup>7</sup> David Bordua goes even further when he contends that deviance "occurs in the absence of effective devices for producing conformity."<sup>8</sup> Apparently for Bordua, the "root causes" of misbehavior are society-wide in nature. The society is failing to reward sufficiently behavior it publicly deems appropriate. If society is the culprit, though, how does one go about transforming such an amorphous, almost chimerical entity?

Once again I have raised a question I cannot answer. What I intend to do in the pages that follow is to offer a systematic review of various attempts to reach beyond the individual student to account for school behavior problems. For ease of analysis, the review will divide the accounts into those that concentrate on family background, peer group influence, the quality of teaching, the school system, and society-in-general. It should be remembered, however, that many researchers find more than one cause for discipline problems. While indications of multiple causes are frequent in the literature, rarely are there references to factors such as individual free-will or initiative (Allport's so-called "proactive, self-directing capacities"). It is this critical omission that prompts this paper and my use of the term depersonalization of blame to describe contemporary efforts to explain student misbehavior.

### *Blaming Family Background*

Few influences on the behavior of the young are more vulnerable to criticism than the family, especially the parents. Setting aside for the moment all the arguments that student misbehavior results from low intelligence, low socioeconomic status, or both — factors that many trace directly to a student's parents — it is well to consider the matter of inept or inappropriate parenting. In a concise review of research on school discipline, William Gnagey cites the results of a study by Thurston, Feldhusen, and Benning.<sup>9</sup> The three researchers find the following factors commonly appear in home situations of children who are identified as "constant classroom deviants:"

1. The discipline by the father is either lax, overly strict, or erratic.
2. The supervision by the mother is at best only fair, or it is downright inadequate.

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<sup>7</sup>James Q. Wilson, "Crime in Society and Schools," *Educational Researcher* 5 (May 1976): 4.

<sup>8</sup>David J. Bordua, "Sociological Perspectives," in *Social Deviancy Among Youth*, The Sixty-fifth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education — Part I, ed. William W. Wattenberg (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 85.

<sup>9</sup>William J. Gnagey, *The Psychology of Discipline in the Classroom* (London: the Macmillan Company, 1970), pp. 17-18.

3. The parents are either indifferent or even hostile toward the child.
4. The family members are scattered in diverse activities and operate only somewhat as a unit or perhaps not at all.
5. The parents find it difficult to talk things over regarding the child.
6. The husband-wife relationship lacks closeness and equality or partnership.
7. The parents find many things to disapprove of in their child.
8. The mothers are not happy with the communities in which they live.
9. The parents resort to angry physical punishment when the child does wrong. Temper control is a difficult problem for them at this time.
10. The parents believe they have little influence on the development of their child.
11. The parents believe that other children exert bad influences upon their child.
12. The parents' leisure time activities lack much of a constructive element.
13. The parents, particularly the father, report no church membership . . . .

In support of the research just cited are several studies plus considerable conventional wisdom. Herschel Rader, in a review of research, observes that the "importance of the mother in the etiology of delinquent behavior has long been axiomatic."<sup>10</sup> W.P. Robinson, who conducted a large study of adolescents in England and Wales, reports that misconduct in school is influenced by student boredom, which, in turn, is correlated with "the values, interests and behavior of parents."<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Robinson finds little relationship between student boredom and "the material and financial conditions of the home."<sup>12</sup>

Rudolf Dreikurs, the late psychiatrist and expert on student misbehavior, attributed much of the problem to poor family climate. He estimated that three out of four American families start the day with a fight.<sup>13</sup> Rising rates of separation, divorce, and unwanted pregnancy, as well as combative domestic environments, are bound to exact a heavy toll on the development of the children involved.

That family climate is a critical factor in the rearing of the young is demonstrated by the findings of a study of 10,000 high school graduates conducted by Berkeley's Center for the Study of Higher Education. The study concludes that a positive family climate, as indicated by parents who are loving, energetic, and ambitious, is directly related to a student's academic motivation, which is related to other factors such as persistence and behavior.<sup>14</sup>

Further support for the critical value of the home environment comes from a comparison of high school drop-outs and graduates admitted to college. The two groups differed significantly from each other as early as the first grade in areas such as academic performance, behavior ratings, absenteeism, and IQ.<sup>15</sup> Family background is the likely cause of much of the variance.

<sup>10</sup>Herschel Rader, "The Child as Terrorist: Seven Cases," *School Review* 84 (November 1975): 31.

<sup>11</sup>W. P. Robinson, "Boredom at School," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 45 (June 1975): 150.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>Jeane Westin, "Let's End Family Warfare," *The PTA Magazine* 68 (November 1973): 14.

<sup>14</sup>James W. Trent, et. al., "Technology, Education, and Human Development," *The Educational Record* 46 (Spring 1965): 97.

<sup>15</sup>Lee W. Yudin, et. al., "School Dropout or College Bound: Study in Contrast," *The Journal of Educational Research* 67 (October 1973): 87-93.

Children from broken homes long have been associated with low achievement and adjustment problems in school. In an unusual study, three British researchers compare the characteristics of 50 delinquent boys of high intelligence (IQ above 115). Unlike many delinquents, these youngsters' problems do not derive from lack of ability. The researchers find, however, that many of their sample come from single-parent homes or have parents receiving psychiatric treatment.<sup>16</sup>

Exactly how parents and family climate influence the behavior of the young is subject to debate. Some researchers feel that parents of "problem children" have been poor models or selfish.<sup>17</sup> Roy Menninger is quoted as saying, "Young people are rebellious largely because their uptight, self-righteous, and hypocritical parents are not giving them a meaningful piece of the action."<sup>18</sup>

Others impugn Benjamin Spock and permissive parenting for school discipline problems. An attitudinal study of Missouri state leaders reveals that many blame misconduct in school on a combination of parental pressure for more permissive schooling and teaching liability laws that discourage teachers from actively disciplining students.<sup>19</sup> Emery Stoops and Joyce King-Stoops present the standard, if somewhat exaggerated and simplistic, indictment of permissive parenting:<sup>20</sup>

Through the last four decades, parents have been in the gradual process of abdication. The head of the household gave way to joint husband-and-wife powers which encouraged children's playing one head against the other. When a spank-the-bottom parents was cancelled out by a permissive mate, the kids ran wild through the home and right into the classroom.

It is one thing to indict the quality of parenting and quite another to say that parents are to blame for discipline problems in school because they do not endow their offspring with sufficient intelligence to succeed in school or they fail to achieve a standard of living high enough to provide the middle class amenities associated so directly with positive school experiences. While the issue of inherited intelligence is still hotly contested, there is general agreement among many that students from lower socioeconomic statuses are more likely to become "behavior problems."<sup>21</sup> To what extent parents have control over their own socioeconomic status is also open to question, though.

Perhaps the last word on the quality of parenting in the United States is provided by Urie Bronfenbrenner.<sup>22</sup> Comparing child-rearing in the U.S. and the Soviet Union, he concludes that American families are not as child-centered as Russian families. U.S. parents spend less time with their children and, in effect, have abandoned them to the questionable influences of television and peer group. As James Coleman demonstrates in his large-scale study of adolescent culture,<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>D. Gath, G. Tennent, and R. Pidduck, "Educational Characteristics of Bright Delinquents," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 40 (June 1970): 216-219.

<sup>17</sup>Winston A. Ahlstrom and Robert J. Havighurst, *400 Losers: Delinquent Boys in High School* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1971).

<sup>18</sup>J. Wilson McKenney, "The Revolt of Youth," *CTA Journal* 65 (January 1969): 5.

<sup>19</sup>Edward C. Lambert, "An Attitudinal Study of Missouri State Leaders Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 57 (December 1975): 279.

<sup>20</sup>Emery Stoops and Joyce King-Stoops, *Discipline or Disaster?* (Bloomington, Indiana: The Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1972), p. 12.

<sup>21</sup>Marvin Powell and Jerry Bergem, "An Investigation of the Differences between Tenth-, Eleventh-, and Twelfth-Grade 'Conforming' and 'Nonconforming' Boys," *Journal of Educational Research* 56 (December 1962): 184-190.

<sup>22</sup>Urie Bronfenbrenner, *Two Worlds of Childhood: U.S. and U.S.S.R.* (New York: Pocket Books, 1973), pp. 99-123

<sup>23</sup>James S. Coleman, *The Adolescent Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1961), p.312.

The adolescent lives more and more in a society of his own, he finds the family a less and less satisfying psychological home. As a consequence, the home has less and less ability to mold him.

### *Blaming the Peer Group*

Assuming that Coleman and Bronfenbrenner are correct when they maintain that some American parents do not create a satisfying environment at home, there is still no proof that misbehavior in school is the direct outgrowth of such environments. Presumably young people must *learn* to misbehave just as they learn to obey rules or to read. There is compelling evidence that the peer group is the primary instrumentality for "teaching" adolescents to act in ways school authorities find unacceptable. Bronfenbrenner would argue that the peer group instructs by default because parents have abdicated their roles as models of appropriate behavior. Whether by default, the naturally greater attraction of age-mates, or an inherent tension between generations, the adolescent peer group is undoubtedly a critical determinant of attitudes and behavior.

As early as 1911 G. Stanley Hall, the eminent psychologist, decried the undesirable consequences of gang culture for urban youth. Hall wrote that the majority of American boys at some point in their lives had belonged to a gang, but he attributed the urge to participate in such groups more to "instinct" than "maturer influences."<sup>24</sup> During the thirties sociological research into the causes of delinquency revealed that deviant acts were generally committed in group situations, a fact that served to confirm the harmful potential of unsupervised collections of youth.<sup>25</sup> In the forties, Robert Havighurst and Hilda Taba recentered the concern over deleterious peer group influence from the streets to the school. They pointed out the negative consequences of peer rejection and the destructive social pressures existing in adolescent culture.<sup>26</sup> N.M. Lorber supports their contentions with the finding that children who are socially unacceptable to their classmates often act in disruptive ways in the classroom.<sup>27</sup>

James Coleman explains that one reason the adolescent peer group is so influential is demographic. With more teenagers than ever before, U.S. schools have become "adolescent cultures," complete with their own sets of values.<sup>28</sup> With reference to Soviet schools, however, Bronfenbrenner observes that adolescent values need not be opposed to the best interests of the school.<sup>29</sup> In the United States, though, few writers report many positive aspects of adolescent values. Presenting the findings of a participant observer ethnographic study of an urban high school, Stuart Palonsky illustrates just how negative peer-dictated values can be:<sup>30</sup>

The reality generated by the interaction with their age-grade peer group defined their classes as boring and not meaningful. Failing and cutting were approved by their groups as legitimate responses to boredom and irrelevance . . . .

<sup>24</sup>G. Stanley Hall, *Educational Problems*, Volume I (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1911), p.301.

<sup>25</sup>David Bordua, "Sociological Perspectives," p. 79.

<sup>26</sup>Robert J. Havighurst and Hilda Taba, *Adolescent Character and Personality* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1949), p. 39.

<sup>27</sup>N. M. Lorber, "Inadequate Social Acceptance and Disruptive Classroom Behavior," *The Journal of Educational Research* 59 (April 1966): 360-362.

<sup>28</sup>James S. Coleman, *The Adolescent Society*, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup>Urie Bronfenbrenner, *Two Worlds of Childhood* pp. 15-73.

<sup>30</sup>Stuart B. Palonsky, "Hempies and Squeaks, Truckers and Cruisers — A Participant Observer Study in A City High School," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 11 (Spring 1975): 98-99.

Palonsky raises the possibility that the adolescent peer group's values may possess a kind of legitimacy based on the inability of teachers to make learning exciting and meaningful. The next section extends this line of argument.

### *Blaming Teachers*

Could it be that teachers — those who often complain the most vociferously about discipline problems — really are responsible for student misbehavior? A number of researchers reply in the affirmative.

Criticism is nothing new to the teaching profession, of course. In the early sixties James Bryant Conant and James Koerner, among others, spoke strongly in favor of making access to the profession more rigorous and selective in order to weed out mediocre teachers.<sup>31</sup> More recently, Charles Silberman, a journalist by trade, has impugned not only teacher education — always a popular target among critics of American schools — but the teachers themselves.<sup>32</sup> He maintains that much of what teachers do is poorly understood by them and inhumane. Research on teacher expectations suggests that student success can be influenced by what the teacher *believes* the student can do — a finding that occasions the disturbing possibility of the “self-fulfilling prophecy” and supports the contention that teachers can harm as well as help students.<sup>33</sup>

Researchers and journalists are not the only people who question the quality of teaching in the public schools. An analysis of students' perceptions of how school can be improved reveals that the young respondents place far more blame for problems on their teachers than on themselves. Among the students' recommendations are “greater teacher effort,” “more interesting activities and classes,” “less favoritism by teachers,” and “more stringent controls.”<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, administrators and parents often cite these same concerns along with one additional criticism — lack of consistent enforcement of school rules by teachers.<sup>35</sup>

While various people seem to feel that teachers contribute to the very problems about which they complain, consensus regarding how this process occurs is lacking. In one review William Gnagey finds that teachers can “cause” student misbehavior by playing roles like “the absolute dictator,” “the matinee idol,” and “the nonentity.”<sup>36</sup> W. Pritchett and D.J. Willower conclude that students tend to harbor negative attitudes toward school and teachers when they perceive teachers to be acting in a rigid or custodial manner.<sup>37</sup>

While the references just cited suggest that discipline problems are related to the role played by the teacher, other studies imply that problems result from the teacher's inadequate understanding of reinforcement theory. Summarizing

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<sup>31</sup>James Bryant Conant, *The Education of American Teachers* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964) and James D. Koerner, *The Miseducation of American Teachers* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965).

<sup>32</sup>Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), pp. 373-411.

<sup>33</sup>For one of the best known works on teacher expectations, see Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).

<sup>34</sup>Frank H. Farley and Jan M. Rosnow, “Student Analyses of Motivation and School Learning,” *Journal of Experimental Education* 43 (Spring 1975): 51-54.

<sup>35</sup>I reached this conclusion following a series of extensive interviews with school administrators and parents concerning school discipline. The results of this research are in the process of being written up for publication.

<sup>36</sup>William J. Gnagey, *The Psychology of Discipline*, pp. 20-29.

<sup>37</sup>W. Pritchett and D. J. Willower, “Student Perceptions of Teacher Pupil Control Behavior and Student Attitudes Toward High School,” *Alberta Journal of Educational Research* 21 (June 1975): 110-115.

research on the subject, W.E.Schmidt and Vernon Tyler state that teachers often unwittingly reinforce disruptive behavior.<sup>38</sup> B.F. Skinner notes,<sup>39</sup>

What appears to be punishment is sometimes reinforcing; a student misbehaves to annoy his teacher or to be admired by his peers when he takes punishment. If the teacher's attention is reinforcing, unwanted responses which attract attention are strengthened.

Terry Huff and John Schnelle indicate that elementary students judged to be well-behaved and those judged to be poorly behaved are equally capable of detecting inappropriate classroom behaviors on video tape. The researchers conclude that a student in the latter group misbehaves "not because he lacks 'awareness' of inappropriate forms of behavior but more likely because of prevalent reinforcement systems."<sup>40</sup>

In the past few decades it has been popular to maintain that punishment by teachers does little to control classroom misbehavior or improve student performance in the long run.<sup>41</sup> Merle Meacham and Allen Wiesen claim that punishment not only is generally ineffective, it actually may foster misconduct.<sup>42</sup>

In controlling children through punishment, threat, and coercion, the excessively punitive teacher is, in effect, teaching the children to be aggressive by serving as a model of aggressiveness.

Few observers feel that teachers purposefully seek to be models of aggressiveness or reinforcers of disruptive behavior. If teachers are to blame for these problems, Thomas Good and Jere Brophy argue it is simply the result of being unaware of what they are doing.<sup>43</sup> Lisa Serbin and K. Daniel O'Leary contend that teachers are unaware of the extent to which they shape their students' behavior:<sup>44</sup>

As nursery-school children busily mold clay, their teachers are molding behavior. Unwittingly, teachers foster an environment where children learn that boys are aggressive and able to solve problems, while girls are submissive and passive.

Suggesting that "bullies are made, not born," the researchers seem to account for the fact that there are typically more boys than girls identified a school "behavior problems."

Thomas Gordon, author of the Teacher Effectiveness Training program, writes that teachers often create a structured teacher-centered environment, not realizing that such a setting all but ensures "that students will remain helplessly dependent, immature, infantile."<sup>45</sup> Gordon goes on to argue that, "Instead of fostering the growth of *responsibility*, teachers and administrators dictate and control students of all ages as if they were not to be trusted and could never be responsible."<sup>46</sup>

<sup>38</sup>W. Ernie Schmidt and Vernon D. Tyler, "The 'Pinpointing Effect' vs. the 'Diffusion Effect' of Peer Influence," *Psychology in the Schools* 12 (October 1975): 485.

<sup>39</sup>B. F. Skinner, *The Technology of Teaching* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), p. 190.

<sup>40</sup>Terry M. Huff and John F. Schnelle, "Discrimination Between Appropriate and Inappropriate Classroom Behaviors by Well Behaved and Poorly Behaved Students," *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 39 (1974): 1252.

<sup>41</sup>For an excellent review of arguments against the use of punishment, see B. F. Skinner's previously cited *The Technology of Teaching*, pp. 95-103.

<sup>42</sup>Merle L. Meacham and Allen E. Wiesen, *Changing Classroom Behavior* (New York: Intext Educational Publishers, 1974), p. 66.

<sup>43</sup>Thomas L. Good and Jere E. Brophy, *Looking in Classrooms* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), p. 28.

<sup>44</sup>Lisa A. Serbin and K. Daniel O'Leary, "How Nursery Schools Teach Girls to Shut up," *Psychology Today* 9 (December 1975): 57.

<sup>45</sup>Thomas Gordon, *T.E.T.: Teacher Effectiveness Training* (New York: Peter H. Wyden, 1974), p. 8.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

Classroom communications is another area in which a lack of awareness by teachers can give rise to behavior problems. Gordon's program and applications of transactional analysis to schools both stress the critical relationship between what teachers say in class, how they say it, and how students behave.<sup>47</sup> Don Thomas and several colleagues find that teachers who voice disapproval without periodically expressing approval or praise experience increased classroom disruptions.<sup>48</sup> They cite a supporting study of first graders to demonstrate that their finding is true even of six-year-olds:<sup>49</sup>

The more often a teacher told first graders to "sit down," the more often they stood up. Only praising sitting seemed to increase sitting behavior.

Since the depersonalization of blame is a difficult process to stop once it commences, it is only natural for those who blame teachers for discipline problems to pave the way for others to indict those who teach teachers. In fact, Good and Brophy observe that "teacher-training programs have seldom equipped teachers with specific teaching techniques or provided them with specific skills for analyzing and labeling classroom behavior."<sup>50</sup> My course at Stanford's School of Education on "School and Classroom Discipline" is one of the few courses offered in the area at any teacher training institution, a disquieting fact in light of the public and professional concern over student misbehavior.

It is one thing to contend that discipline problems result because teachers are ill-trained to deal with misconduct — that they reward the wrong behavior, play favorites, enforce rules inconsistently, and punish innocent students. It is quite another matter to argue that teachers contribute to discipline problems by teaching poorly (a distinction here is drawn between instruction and classroom management). The strong evidence showing a direct relationship between lack of school success and student discipline problems implies that good teaching is the first line of defense against misbehavior.<sup>51</sup> The work of John Dollard and others points to the close connection between frustration — often triggered by academic failure — and school aggression.<sup>52</sup> If teachers neglect students in need of fundamental skills development or fail to enlist outside assistance to help students with learning problems that cannot be handled in the regular classroom context, they may have to assume a substantial part of the blame for the behavior problems that typically ensue.

### *Blaming the School System*

Times have changed considerably since an article entitled "Education Prevents Delinquency" appeared in a 1933 issue of *The Phi Delta Kappan*.<sup>53</sup> At that point,

<sup>47</sup>In addition to Gordon's book cited above, see Ken Ernst, *Games Students Play* (Millbrae, California: Celestial Arts Publishing, 1975) for a discussion of transactional analysis in classrooms.

<sup>48</sup>Don R. Thomas, Wesley C. Becker, and Marianne Armstrong, "Production and Elimination of Disruptive Classroom Behavior by Systematically Varying Teacher's Behavior," in *Learning in Social Settings*, ed. Matthew W. Miles and W. W. Charters, Jr. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1970), p. 111.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup>Thomas L. Good and Jere E. Brophy, *Looking in Classrooms*, p. 32.

<sup>51</sup>In addition to referring to the previous study by Marvin Powell and Jerry Bergem, see Daniel L. Duke, "A High School Studies Its Discipline Problems" (in press) and Kate Hevner Mueller, "Programs for Deviant Girls" in William W. Wattenberg (ed.), p. 353.

<sup>52</sup>William J. Gnagey, *The Psychology of Discipline*, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup>Edward H. Stulken, "Education Prevents Delinquency," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 15 (April 1933): 172-175.

the creation of special schools was being hailed as the key to the elimination of wasted lives and juvenile misconduct. Nowadays, many observers believe that schools create rather than prevent discipline problems. W. Gordon West posits the notion that "the very structure of contemporary schooling fosters 'immorality' (delinquency)."<sup>54</sup>

In recent years it has become more common to shift the blame for a variety of social problems from individuals and groups to institutions. Bureaucracies have been particularly hard hit.<sup>55</sup> The arguments generally focus on characteristics within the very *structure* of institutions that compel individuals to behave or misbehave in certain ways. A frequently heard cry among the Watergate conspirators was that the "system" was to blame. Schools and "the school system" have not been immune to criticism.

Discipline problems have been explained by looking at several different dimensions of contemporary schooling in the United States. West maintains that schools ensure that some students always will fail, thereby perpetuating dissatisfaction and misbehavior. Minimizing the negative influence of both family background and peer group, he argues that the reduction of adolescent deviance in school can occur only by eliminating educational environments where success cannot be obtained by all.<sup>56</sup>

Lending support to West's contention are Francis Cullen and Vincent Tinto, who utilize Mertonian analysis to indicate that a school's restriction of the opportunity to achieve academic success is a major source of discipline problems.<sup>57</sup> They also claim that the tendency to respond to academic failure with deviant behavior is strongest among minority group students and students from low socioeconomic statuses.

Some researchers contend that schools create behavior problems by neglecting to deal with values or by instilling values that are antithetical to good citizenship. Among those taking the latter stance is Patricia Sexton. She believes that schools stimulate student resistance, resentment, and rebellion by stressing the value of individual achievement and competition to the exclusion of more cooperative values.<sup>58</sup> W.P. Robison, in the previously cited study of boredom in English schools, agrees with Sexton:<sup>59</sup>

The association between boredom and competition is also noteworthy. Where competition between individuals is constructed and encouraged and where winning is rewarded, it is inevitable that there must be losers. But is it not absurd to construct a system of education where only a minority are viewed as winners? And what are the chronic losers to do? Very few people will persist at playing at some game in which they invariably lose, and yet we tolerate a situation in which children are consistently allowed to lose every school day, for perhaps ten years of their lives.

Theodore Brameld harbors a different view. He feels that, "Insofar as American education has tended to regard its chief business as that of conveying information

<sup>54</sup>W. Gordon West, "Adolescent Deviance and the School," *Interchange* 6 (1975): 49.

<sup>55</sup>Daniel Linden Duke, "Challenge to Bureaucracy: The Contemporary Alternative School," *Journal of Educational Thought* 10 (April 1976): 34-48.

<sup>56</sup>W. Gordon West, "Adolescent Deviance and the School," P. 51.

<sup>57</sup>Francis T. Cullen and Vincent Tinto, "A Mertonian Analysis of School Deviance" (Paper presented at the 1975 Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Washington, D. C.).

<sup>58</sup>Patricia Cayo Sexton, *The American School: A Sociological Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 87.

<sup>59</sup>W. P. Robison, "Boredom at School," p. 151.

and training in skills, it has tended to store its values ... in the educational attic ..."<sup>60</sup> In other words, Brameld feels that schools are guilty of avoiding values entirely rather than inculcating the wrong values.

Yet a third value-oriented perspective emerges in an article by James Q. Wilson on crime in schools. Wilson refers to a study by Arthur Stinchcombe in which rebelliousness appeared to originate among "young boys and girls who from the outset are aiming at . . . a working class lifestyle."<sup>61</sup> By ignoring the values and aspirations of the non-college-bound, secondary schools encourage dissatisfaction and defiance. In a review of research on school deviance, Paul Bellaby finds corroborating evidence for Stinchcombe's conclusion. Looking at secondary schools in England, he reports that many students first manifest hostility toward school around their sophomore year when their "concept of the future" makes schooling seem irrelevant.<sup>62</sup> This findings seem to contradict the research that suggests high school "problem" students can be identified as early as the first grade. Apparently, some adolescents who intend to pursue vocations after graduation feel that the stress on the acquisition of academic information and the lack of emphasis on marketable skills are not conducive to positive school experiences.

Schools have been implicated in the creation of their own discipline problems in other ways besides ensuring that some students fail and neglecting the matter of values. Charles Silberman attributes much of the school system's woes to sheer "mindlessness," the failure of teachers and administrators "to ask why they are doing what they are doing — to think seriously or deeply about the purposes or consequences of education."<sup>63</sup>

A California study of violence in schools provides more specific criticism than Silberman's. It blames school violence in part on ineffective school administrators, inconsistent disciplinary practices, oppressive school rules, inadequate counseling, curriculum irrelevance, and staff bigotry.<sup>64</sup> This rather blanket indictment of the school system is reflected in another piece of research, a longitudinal study of U.S. schools by the American Institutes for Research. The study identifies seven problem areas, most of which have some bearing on student misbehavior and dissatisfaction.<sup>65</sup>

1. grossly inadequate vocational guidance
2. too many harmful teachers
3. lack of individualized instruction
4. inadequate curriculum
5. lack of personal support
6. too few alternative ways to learn
7. ineffective education for citizenship in a democratic society

The studies just cited and other recent educational writing call into question the quality of schooling in the United States and the viability of compulsory, universal education. But the "buck" need not stop with the schools of America. If in reality

<sup>60</sup>Theodore Brameld, *Cultural Foundations of Education* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. 13.

<sup>61</sup>James Q. Wilson, "Crime in Society and Schools," p. 5.

<sup>62</sup>Paul Bellaby, "The Distribution of Deviance Among 13-14 Year Old Students," in *Contemporary Research in the Sociology of Education*, ed. John Eggleston (London: Methuen, 1974), pp. 167-168.

<sup>63</sup>Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom*, p. 11.

<sup>64</sup>*Teacher* 91 (January 1974): 25.

<sup>65</sup>"Ex-Students Pinpoint Wrongs in Nation's High Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 57 (March 1976): 484-485.

schools do little more than reflect the interests and biases of the society in which they exist, the ultimate culprit in the school discipline "crisis" must be none other than society itself.

### *Blaming Society*

What is it about contemporary U.S. society that prompts some observers to maintain that it is to blame for youthful misconduct? After all, other nations do not report such severe problems with disobedience and disrespect in school. Once again, no single factor is put forward to explain school discipline problems. About the only thing on which observers agree is the fact that schools do not exist in isolation — what goes on inside schools is also manifest outside.

Some explanations, such as the one that follows, are vague indictments that prove virtually useless in pinpointing the causes of student misbehavior:<sup>66</sup>

The statement that there are no delinquent children, only delinquent parents, is open to serious question. This view assumes that a parent could do better if he merely decided to do so . . . . Can we take for granted that the parent knows what is best and can apply his knowledge? The circumstances in which the parent lived as a child and as a youth have served to mold him so that his own fears and insecurities become a part of him. Actually society as a whole is responsible for delinquent behavior since both the parent and the child are its products.

Other accounts concerned with increasing behavior problems among American youth, both inside and outside of school, focus on the phenomenon of adolescence. Adolescence is seen to be a creation of society, a culture-based holding operation designed to keep physically mature youth out of a saturated job market. Urie Bronfenbrenner speaks of the negative impact of an age-segregated society, one in which young people rarely interact with adults who could serve as models or children who could provide opportunities for service.<sup>67</sup> James Coleman feels it is not surprising that teenagers are bored with school and life in general. They have few opportunities in contemporary society to be genuinely productive.<sup>68</sup> Robert Havighurst echoes this contention when he states that, since 1950, American society has denied its youth "maturity-promoting experience."<sup>69</sup> Rudolf Dreikurs adds that "adolescents resent the unwillingness of the adult community to give them any part in deciding about activities and regulations regarding their own welfare."<sup>70</sup> The obvious conclusion of these observations is that a society which babies its adolescents should expect adolescents who behave immaturely.

In the wake of widespread reports of government scandal and the corruption of high officials, it is also possible to argue that misbehaving youth simply are following the lead of their elders. With the realization that students from affluent backgrounds are just as capable of disobedience and disrespect as those from impoverished homes, it appears that upward mobility — the great American promise — is not an automatic solution to discipline problems. S.L. Halleck contends,<sup>71</sup>

<sup>66</sup>Joseph Resnick, "Antisocial Behavior: Whose Fault," in *Improving School Discipline*, ed. Leslie J. Chamberlin and Joseph B. Carnot (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, 1974), p. 116.

<sup>67</sup>Urie Bronfenbrenner, *Two Worlds of Childhood*, pp. 101-116.

<sup>68</sup>"The Children Have Outgrown the Schools," *Psychology Today* 5 (February 1972): 72-75.

<sup>69</sup>Robert J. Havighurst, "Youth in Crisis," *School Review* 83 (November 1974): 6.

<sup>70</sup>Rudolf Dreikurs and Loren Grey, *Logical Consequences: A Handbook of Discipline* (New York: Meredith Press, 1968), p.5.

<sup>71</sup>J. Wilson McKenney, "The Revolt of Youth," p. 5.

We must re-examine our time-honored reverence for affluence, power, and bigness, and face the possibility that affluence bores, that power corrupts, and that big institutions diminish the stature of man.

In an essay of this length it is impossible to touch on all the possible impetuses to student misbehavior that society either creates or tacitly sanctions. In passing, however, mention must be made of the influence exerted by television and the movies on youthful aggression, the school disturbances attributable to the profound levels of racism found in many quarters of the society, and the yet unstudied effects of overcrowding on student conduct. Does class conflict play a role in escalating discipline problems? Has society become so relativistic that young people no longer can be clear about right and wrong? How is the rise in crime rates linked to the increase in student misbehavior? Currently there are more questions than answers regarding the relationship between school discipline and societal influences.

### *Blaming Nobody*

A review of contemporary efforts to account for school discipline problems would be incomplete without reference to those who argue that much student misbehavior is a normal, even a healthy, part of growing up.

In his massive study of student movements, Lewis Feuer maintains that conflict between generations is a basic historical theme, albeit one that sometimes produces tragic results.<sup>72</sup> William Kvaraceus, a leading student of adolescent deviance, cautions against ignoring the positive aspects of misconduct:<sup>73</sup>

The communication channels between adolescent subculture and adult culture are seldom open and clear. Many youths unconsciously communicate to the adult society via their norm-violating behavior that "something is wrong" within the adolescent subculture or in the individual's personal make-up. A delinquent act can serve as an SOS signal which the adult community cannot afford to ignore.

Extending Kvaraceus's idea, R.P. McDermott contends that,<sup>74</sup>

School failure and delinquency often represent highly motivated and intelligent attempts to develop the abilities, statuses, and identities that will best equip the child to maximize his utilities in the politics of everyday life. If the teacher is going to send degrading messages of relationship regardless of how the game is played, the child's best strategy is to stop playing the game.

Although he takes a more moderate stance than the previous two writers, David Ausubel likewise maintains that misbehavior is an important part of youth in many instances. Ausubel contends that breaking rules provides the young with experiences that can serve as future reference points. "Acknowledgment of wrong-doing and acceptance of punishment are part of learning moral accountability," he claims.<sup>75</sup> The implication is that children who grow up without having misbehaved and suffered the consequences lack a critical component of moral development.

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<sup>72</sup>Lewis S. Feuer, *The Conflict of Generations* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1969), pp. 27-44.

<sup>73</sup>William C. Kvaraceus, "Programs of Early Identification and Prevention of Delinquency," in William W. Wattenberg, p. 217.

<sup>74</sup>R.P. McDermott, "Achieving School Failure: An Anthropological Approach to Illiteracy and Social Stratification" in *Education and Cultural Process*, ed. George D. Spindler, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974), p. 113.

<sup>75</sup>David P. Ausubel and Floyd G. Robinson, *School Learning* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969), p. 469.

*The Depersonalization of Blame and the Depreciation of Individual Integrity*

The previous pages summarize recent attempts to determine the origins of student misbehavior. Some of these accounts clearly fit the category I term the politics of apology. In other words, they represent deliberate efforts to vindicate or shift the blame from one factor to another. Other accounts are more objective investigations. Whatever the motives, the net result of these endeavors usually has been to minimize the responsibility of the individual student for his inappropriate behavior in school — or what I refer to as the depersonalization of blame. I maintain that this process is not always in the best interests of the student, the school, or the society, though in the short run it may be politically expedient.

One undesirable by-product of the depersonalization of blame is the tendency to increase the benefits for those who misbehave. Confronted with “evidence” showing that a student’s misconduct is the likely result of strife at home, association with the “wrong crowd,” or too much violence on television, a compassionate teacher or administrator is compelled to display understanding and tolerance toward students who break school or classroom rules. Naturally, this kind of reaction creates a problem. Why should students conform to rules if those who disobey them receive as much or more adult attention than those who do not? Token economies and other enticing reward systems generally are used to improve the behavior of “problem” students, not reinforce the actions of “good” students. The student who always obeys the rules and respects his teachers is expected to survive on intrinsic motivation alone. Meanwhile, his misbehaving counterpart receives more attention from his teachers and often the adulation of his peers. While I do not mean to imply that misbehaving students should be ostracized or treated harshly, I am suggesting that a second thought be given the ways with which they are handled.

The last point leads to a second undesirable by-product of the depersonalization of blame. By consistently accounting for an individual’s behavior in terms of factors external to the individual, researchers are contributing to the depreciation of individual integrity. If a student’s behavior in school is the exclusive product of family background, peer group, teachers, the school system, and societal influences, why should he bother to obey rules or act appropriately. For that matter, why should anyone aspire to perfection, act altruistically, cooperate with his fellow human beings, or owe his allegiance to a cause greater than himself in a society where his behavior is pre-determined or externally shaped?

While this paper is not intended as an existential polemic directed against social scientists who, perhaps unwittingly, would exonerate individuals of all responsibility for their behavior, it does attempt to sound a note of caution. Are people truly victims of forces beyond their control? What is the prognosis for a society of victims in which everyone can blame his transgressions or problems on someone or something else?

Rather than close on what appears to be a pessimistic note, I would like to argue that individuals are responsible, at least in part, for their own behavior — both their achievements and their failings. It is well to remember that students misbehave because they forget the rules as well as because they subconsciously are striking out at an authoritarian father. The irrelevance of the curriculum and televised disrespect for authority are not the only reasons why students skip classes. At times, they simply prefer doing something else — a reaction not uncommon among adults who stay home from work for “personal” reasons. Whatever the school discipline problem, it is important to keep in mind the role

played by a student's free will. To minimize or eliminate this role is to diminish the student's humanity.

The ultimate improvement of school discipline depends on whether educators and parents can convince young people that they themselves are largely responsible for their own behavior. The continued depersonalization of blame, assisted by the currently popular politics of apology, will not inspire American youth to look first to themselves to correct their misbehavior. Only a reaffirmation of the individual's responsibility for acting appropriately can accomplish this function. As Jesse Jackson, one of Martin Luther King's lieutenants, wisely observes with regard to the education of black students:<sup>76</sup>

We keep saying that Johnny doesn't read because he's deprived, hungry and discriminated against . . . . One of the reasons Johnny does not read well is that Johnny doesn't practice reading.

### *The Unfinished Agenda*

The compulsion to identify the environmental factors that "cause" students to misbehave has led to a neglect of several important activities. Research on school discipline is a continuing need, but not only the kind that searches for correlates of misbehavior for a known population of "problem" students or reports on the effectiveness of a teaching technique for controlling classroom disruptions. Researchers must

1. investigate the individual student's role in misbehavior and in correcting his misbehavior
2. look at discipline problems as school, rather than purely classroom, phenomena
3. determine what degree of student misconduct is functional or even desirable
4. trace how concepts of appropriate and inappropriate behavior change over time and from place to place
5. study the reasons why schools in countries other than the United States report so few discipline problems
6. employ techniques like stimulated recall to find out how students perceive misbehavior, both their own and that of other students
7. tap the vast amount of data on discipline maintained by most schools

In addition to expanding research on school discipline, efforts need to be mounted to incorporate subjects like student behavior, rights, and responsibilities into the regular curriculum. After all, if the public cares how its young people behave, there is no reason why schools should not teach about behavior and test students on such matters as school rules and the consequences for disobeying them. The Kettering Foundation's Task Force '74 took a positive step in this direction by drafting a list of basic student responsibilities to accompany the plethora of lists of student rights.<sup>77</sup> Elsewhere I have proposed a Systematic Management Plan for School Discipline that calls for, among other things, developing in students a sense that they are spending a third of each day in a rule-governed institu-

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<sup>76</sup> *Time* March 22, 1976, p. 6.

tion.<sup>78</sup> William Glasser, by developing the practice of “reality therapy,” has provided a potentially powerful tool for building in students a sense of personal responsibility.<sup>79</sup> Rudolf Dreikurs’ exposition of “logical consequences” represents another useful technique for encouraging students to assume responsibility for their actions.<sup>80</sup>

If the matter of student responsibility can be addressed in a positive, educational way, rather than being treated as a punitive reaction to reports of declining student conduct, it is possible that the problem of school discipline can be improved. The ultimate resolution of the problem, though, depends on the ability of young people — and adults — to stop regarding themselves and others as victims and to begin seeing themselves as responsible human beings able to determine a significant portion of their own behavior.

Le comportement des étudiants, la dépersonnalisation du blâme et une société de victimes

La lecture des ouvrages consacrés aux causes de la mauvaise conduite des étudiants et des problèmes croissants de discipline dans les écoles montre que l'on a de plus en plus dépersonnalisé le blâme pour l'inconduite individuelle. L'étudiant qui se conduit mal n'est plus tenu pour responsable de ses actes. La désobéissance et l'irrespect sont imputés à divers facteurs tels que l'influence de la famille ou des pairs, le mauvais enseignement, le système scolaire ou la société en général. L'auteur pense qu'il est néfaste d'attacher de moins en moins d'importance à la responsabilité individuelle et que cela risque de créer une société de victimes.

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<sup>77</sup>Task Force '74, *The Adolescent, Other Citizens, and Their High Schools* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975), pp. 47-51.

<sup>78</sup>Daniel L. Duke, “A Systematic Management Plan for School Discipline,” *NASSP Bulletin* 61 (January 1977): 1-10.

<sup>79</sup>William Glasser, *Schools Without Failure* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 1-24.

<sup>80</sup>Rudolf Dreikurs and Loren Grey, *Logical Consequences: A Handbook of Discipline* (New York: Hawthorn, 1968).